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ABHILASHA & Other Stories

By P. R. TAIKAD

"Unto thyself thy law"

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P. R. Taikad is the pen name of a veteran journalist of New Delhi. Belonging to a profession which compels him to meet people of all kinds and write on men and events day after day, he finds relaxation in talking, not writing, and spending time with his children and telling them stories, real and imaginary, sustained by their lively minds.

The books, now being published, are mostly compilations of a few occasional pieces (salvaged out of an unpreserved or ill-preserved lot) in prose and verse.

Living in the capital with its cosmopolitan population, his writings reflect a perspective of the changing political and social values of the great metropolis with both its triumph and tragedy.

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Bhawan's Sri Sankaracharya Vidya Mahavidyala
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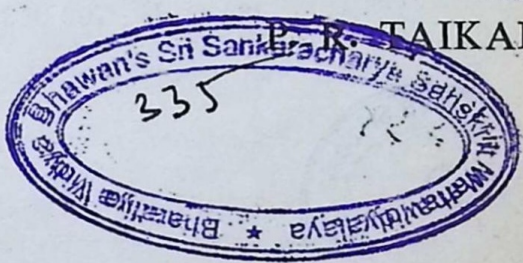
P. R. TAIKAD



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INTRODUCTION

This book of stories appears simultaneously with a book of verse entitled "Autumn Airs, a bunch of old and new poems" as my somewhat pretentious but meagre contribution to Indo-Anglian writing.

The stories have no general pattern and are largely an experiment, so far as I am concerned, in presenting imaginative characters and incidents which are typically Indian. Whatever this may connote to foreigners, I may caution Indian readers that they would lack verisimilitude if judged from a purely regional point of view and have, therefore, a certain attenuation of vitality. I am convinced that the present-day trend of close-up pictures with their detail and local temper, make for more forcible writing. These stories from a mind nurtured in the many-splendoured but promiscuous atmosphere of the nation's capital, must, therefore, be taken for what they are worth.

For the rest, I reprint here the copy of a "A letter to an Englishman" (printed in my book of verse referred to above) which has a bearing on the general trend of writing, which these stories represent, in regard to Indo-Anglian writing.

I do not make any apology for my limitations. A lame man is not shy when he walks.

P.R.T.

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A LETTER TO AN ENGLISHMAN

Dear friend,

After receiving your helpful comments on my Mss. I kept pondering over the wisdom of sending it to my publishers. I realized that, ultimately, I would have to make up my mind myself about it.

I do not know whether you have seen the book "The Great Betrayal" by our well-known Anglo-Indian leader, Mr. Frank Anthony. His theme was that the British, after ruling India for two centuries, left behind their Anglo-Indian progeny with what to free India would be an alien language and an alien culture and without providing adequate safeguards for their survival.

Is this problem confined to Anglo-Indians? I am not sure that it does not affect a whole lot of others also, who, in the course of three or four generations, adopted for themselves the English language and a good deal of English social and cultural habits, though, whether they knew it or not, they could never be English born to the race and culture as it were, especially as most of them lived what was practically a bi-cultural life in a powerfully dominant social and religious environment. I would like to share with you some thoughts on how this legacy manifested itself before and after independence.

In the small district town of Palghat, in the south of India, there was within living memory an old gentleman who decided to make of himself a British country Squire. Fortunately for him, he had wealth, houses

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and lands and also a local community depending on his largesse. He had paid only a brief visit to England, but that did not prevent him from evolving a copy-book pattern of British country life, derived largely from English literature, to a considerable extent Victorian.

Discarding the local costume of a dhoti (or mundu, as it is called in that part of the country) worn round his torso, he adopted lounge suits, plus-fours, the morning cap complete with a pipe and the prescribed dress for the evenings and dinner suit for the night. This old faithful of the Union Jack, not being content with making himself a brown proto-type of a British squire, insisted on his wife, an old fat woman of 55, wearing frocks and evening gowns, her hair shingled and walking with high-heeled shoes. For the rest, tea, bread and fried eggs went for breakfast with the morning newspaper (alas, not the Times) placed on the table by a properly accoutred butler.

One may be amused, but, in varying degrees, the British left a good number of such Squires "civilised" in proper English fashion. One can still see remnants of them in odd places in India like Ootacamund, Simla or even Calcutta, that "cradle of Indian nationalism." The British, in the words of Mr. Anthony, not only betrayed the Anglo-Indians but many such people, all now fortunately of lamented memory.

Despite the upsurge of nationalism, truants survived in varying disguises, but ultimately, I think, settled down to merely adopting the English language for themselves for good. One may trace this tradition to the late Rt. Hon. V. S. Sreenivasa Sastry P.C.C.H., who

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used to be known as the "silver-tongued orator" (in the English language, of course) and gave a series of lectures, still read with interest for their "creative interpretation" of the great Hindu epic Ramayana. That was the picture during the march to freedom.

Post-independence generations contain many who, although strongly nationalistic, nurtured their admiration and partiality for the English language. After all the transmutations, all these Indians, quite proud of their national status, have settled into groups who defend their right to write in English. They are known as Indo-Anglian writers, being carefully distinguished from Mr. Frank Anthony's Anglo-Indians. One may regard them as people with Indian hearts and English pens since they cannot express themselves for literary purposes in any language other than English, though how well or ill they do so in English is another matter. I have no doubt in my mind that I belong to this generation and such writing as I have done should reflect its merits and limitations.

This brings me to the point of my decision about the publication of my books. I felt that, such as they are, they represent the thoughts and sentiments of people who think like me and, as such, therefore may draw some interest.

I am conscious that it may require a spirit of tolerance to understand them or even read them sympathetically. But I submit that they deserve to be read, if for no other reason, for the fact that they are so "different".

May I explain my point a little in general terms with reference to Indo-Anglian writers as a whole?

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What is basic to their situation is that, in the post-colonial era, except the English language as a medium of expression, there is perhaps little in common between them and the English people. Nor is this the limit of the gap, for, even in regard to English creative writing, with which alone we are concerned at the moment, divergence in perspectives in regard to themes and arguments and also forms of expression lead to stylistic variations of different kinds. And, in regard to India, there are variations in the social and cultural background of the different regions which make up the sub-continent, with their respective substrata, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and so on. All these are inevitably reflected in their writing.

Considering that Indo-Anglian writing, both in prose and verse, has begun to proliferate vigorously, friends like you in England must be wondering whether history has done the right thing by you, Englishmen, by throwing the English of your kings and queens to the high winds so that it has poured its pollens on many lands and germinated colourful variations of the English language with their own jarring or, if you would like to call it so in your English way, charming, aberrations in syntax, spelling and intonation.

You may recollect that the famous quotation "The sun never sets in the British Empire," was not a popular slogan with the former colonies of the British crown. But today, the truth cannot be hidden that the sun never sets on the English-speaking world. Winston Churchill wrote about the English-speaking peoples of the world, but in the pursuit of the dispersal of the British race, the great statesman missed what is per-

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haps a grander theme, namely, the dispersal of the English language among millions of people who are non-British. Though not their mother tongue, English is today the adopted language of expression of many races all over the globe.

What is happening is perhaps reminiscent of the Renaissance which occurred periodically in English history during the last five or six centuries. Only, it is not now confined to the British Isles. With English planted by the erstwhile colonial regime in several countries, English literature in the world as a whole is feeling the impact of multi-racial and multi-cultural outpourings from different countries which formerly formed parts of the British empire. The variety of such literature must inevitably be both staggering and baffling, adopting different idioms in India, Burma, Pakistan,, Sri Lanka, the African countries and the West Indies, even if you exclude USA and Australia—in all countries in fact where the English language has found new roots.

Apart from the inevitable local variations in themes, forms and styles, such literature has also understandably registered the impact on it of the changing pattern and styles of the English literature of the traditionally English-speaking countries. You must read to believe the Imagist poetry of the Indo-Anglians. The English literature of the world is thus fast becoming a magnificent assemblage of varieties of experimental writing. Any kind of discipline or standardisation, at any rate at this stage of its growth, although desirable, would appear to be an impossible exercise. And so, let a hundred blossoms bloom.

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I think I have given you the rationale behind this publication. Good, bad or indifferent, in a remote and vicarious way, its home is England, the England (of the English language) which remains unknown to many who make free, as I have done, with her glorious tongue.

For this, may I say, thank you?

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DEDICATION

To

our father

who is no more with us

but, while he lived, introduced us to

the wealth of English literature

and

our mother

who, at 89, has been in a hurry

to see this book published

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My children, Manju, Lalloo, Jenji, Tarini, Pappu and Viji, have insisted that I must write and sentenced me to authorship.

My wife asked : "Why not ?" and helped me with the publication of the book.

My beloved friend, Jagdish Prasad Chaturvedi, made me shy to meet him telling me relentlessly, "You always say 'you will write' but you will never write". Well, friend, here is the finished goods.

But for my brother, whose motto is 'Go Ahead', this book and its companion volume, "Autumn Airs, a bunch of old and new poems" would never have been printed and published.

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The stories in this book are largely imaginary and the characters are fictitious. Any resemblance, therefore, to persons, living or dead, is purely accidental. This is also true of the incidents depicted, though at times, details of the background which are true to facts, give them a veneer of actuality.

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ANSWERING TO THE NAME OF ABHILASHA

I

The story of the Paranjpyes was something of an idyll to their sophisticated neighbourhood in Bombay city. It seemed they lived in a little world of their own untrammelled by the tensions and turmoil of the metropolis.

It was all the more moving because they were by no means well-to-do. They lived in a one-room flat with a small annexe which they used as an extra room for their daughter. Abhilasha, 21, was completing her post-graduate studies in the University. The parents, it seemed, became known because of the girl.

Abhilasha going to college with the crowd in the morning and returning home in the evening was a familiar sight. No one could resist the temptation to observe her. She was by no means a ravishing beauty, but good health, grace and vivacity at that age would make any girl appear beautiful. Perhaps, she was like a beautiful film star made up to look like an ordinary lower-middle class city girl.

In the evenings, the parents would move around for their small shopping needs and Abhilasha would accompany them with a bag in hand. The happy trio would exchange greetings with neighbours and stop for small chat with the few friends they had. Not that they were a very socially get-together type. Abhilasha was busy with her books most of the time and the parents spent all the hours of the day to keep house for their daughter.

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Born many years after wedlock, almost when they had given up hopes of having a child, Abhilasha filled the lives of her parents with all the joy they deserved for the love they lavished on her. They had named her Abhilasha (meaning 'Desire') because she symbolised not only the longings of their love but the assurance of their family lineage and a whole lot of dreams and wishes for the future.

Mr. Paranjpye was a Surat man. His parents had been poor and he had not much of an education. But he did well, nevertheless, for his accomplishments and lived in lower middle class comfort. When Abhilasha was born, he saved every pie he earned to give her the happiest possible life a child in that setting could have. Abhilasha indeed brought sunshine into their lives, for she was sweet and smart from her baby days. To say that the parents doted on her would be an understatement for Mr. and Mrs. Paranjpye lived in her. The house, as an establishment, was kept running for her.

Mrs. Paranjpye was a gloating mother, while the father watched with proud satisfaction their only child grow into a beautiful girl. It was God's kind blessing, their neighbours would say, that the girl had not lost her head, for, Abhilasha was modest and friendly with everyone and was, at the same time, the best student of the local school. Stinting on everything else at home, the parents gave the child all she needed. They got their dividend when Abhilasha won prizes at school and was indeed the favourite pupil of her teachers.

Mr. Paranjpye, despite his age, decided to move to Bombay to help his daughter's college education. He gave up his fairly comfortable job in Surat for a more or less part-time employment in Bombay with meagre wages, hoping to get Abhilasha through college by

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using up his savings. Her education was not, however, much of a problem because she got a merit scholarship and a great deal of encouragement from her Professors. She had won her graduation with honours and a gold medal and had now completed her post-graduate course also.

She could easily get a good job in the city, but Mr. and Mrs. Paranjpye wanted to leave it to the girl to choose her career. They would like to see her married and, with the grace and distinction she had, a possible marriage at a much higher level than their own was a happy prospect. In fact, one of her teachers had told Mr. Paranjpye that a young Civil Servant, who had graduated from the same college, was very much interested in her. The Paranjpyes were full of sweet dreams for Abhilasha, but they would leave the decision to her when her university career ended.

This came soon. As was expected, Abhilasha came first in her course in the whole State. The good news came with another unexpected but thrilling announcement. In response to a Commonwealth Association offer of fellowship for specialisation in Commonwealth studies, her name had been forwarded to London along with a few others. And now, this offer of an opportunity to go to London and have a three-year course at Oxford came about the same time as her M. A. result.

Mr. Paranjpye's happiness had reached its climax. This was an unbelievable dream come true for them. With mixed joy and tears, they decided that they would not stand in the way of Abhilasha going abroad, especially since they found that, if they had said 'No', their child would be disappointed. Abhilasha was a well-bred and

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wise girl and she could be trusted to keep off temptations in the West.

And so it was that Abhilasha's going abroad was decided upon. From the day this became a certainty, the Paranjpyes, who slept on cots on either side of their daughter's, spent restless nights. They could not talk too much about it, lest they should distress the child. In the darkness, they would lie awake heavy with their thoughts over the coming parting. They were up long before dawn and each would argue that they should not show their feelings to their child lest the poor thing, going far away, should be unhappy.

Thus they managed to disguise their anguish and help their child to prepare for the journey. They told her it would be a grand thing to hear from her every day and they would write to her every day too, all about home and her friends.

When finally the day of her departure came, they were told that transport arrangements were pooled by the local British Consulate for all the ten students from India going to Britain on this fellowship and parents had to take leave of their wards in the Consulate premises from where they would be taken to the airport.

That day was a day of worship at Abhilasha's home. Her parents went to the nearby temple and brought prasad* for her and they applied sindoor** on her forehead before they took her to the Consulate. Abhilasha was in tears too when she looked at her aging parents and told them to take good care of themselves. They hugged her and kissed her and when she finally went into the room to join the others for their

* Offerings to God, such as flowers and sweets distributed to devotees in Hindu Temples.
** Vermilion.

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departure, the old people waited outside. People were hurrying here and there. Mr. Paranjpye enquired of an official where the kids were and the official laughed: "Kids? Everyone of them is much older than you are, Chum". And he rushed off. Then they saw cars leaving and they thought they saw Abhilasha in one of the air company vans.

Tense with agitation and heavy hearts, they decided to go to the airport. "We can get a look at her as she goes to the plane", the father said. Luckily, there was a taxi and, as they had brought some extra money, they engaged it and hurried to the airport. The bustle and confusion there was too much for the old parents of Abhilasha. They made inquiries at many counters where the team of students going to London could be found. They could get no clear guidance, but at last one kind young officer said they were being cleared by the customs and, if they stood on the balcony, they could see their daughter being escorted to the aircraft. And so, they climbed up the stairs hurriedly, which made them pant for breath, and took their place right near the balcony railings.

They waited and waited and saw many vans going up and down and groups of people disperse and more come in, to watch the landing and take-off of the planes. They waited patiently for more than an hour for they could not bring themselves to ask any one whether the BOAC plane with the students for London had taken off, since everyone appeared to be busy. Finally, they asked a young woman standing near them and she said, "Why, they went off in the blue bus about 10 minutes ago. Didn't you see? My brother too was there, but from this distance I couldn't spot him."

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So, she had not seen her brother and they too had not seen their daughter. Abhilasha was gone, their daughter, their dear child, all alone and far away.

The old couple helped each other to reach home. From then on, every day, their job was to stand before Abhilasha's photographs, which were displayed all over their small house, take them from the wall, wipe them clean and put them back again.

They had no letter from Abhilasha for over a week and they were told that letters from parents to their wards should be addressed to the Consulate for despatch to London. They followed all instructions, but there was no reply from Abhilasha.

Two weeks, three, four—there was no letter from Abhilasha and the poor parents were stricken with grief and fear whether their child had reached London at all. They sought an interview with the British Consulate official concerned and he said that they must all have reached safely. He also assured them that all letters addressed to students had been forwarded to them.

Thereafter, Mr. Paranjpye's visits to the Consulate became frequent. The college authorities had said that, since Abhilasha had finished her studies in the college and the scholarship had been given by the Commonwealth Association of London, they had no contact with her. The Principal promised, however, to write to the authorities who had communicated the award.

Mr. Paranjpye met with little success in the Consulate. They said that they had forwarded all his letters to his daughter and were sorry that her parents had not heard from her in reply. On a subsequent visit, he heard that there had been a communication from London that Miss Paranjpye had undergone her initial

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orientation course in London and had been directed to report to her college in Oxford.

"That means she has reached and is well", the poor father told his anxious wife at home. "You know in these big cities", he added by way of an explanation, "students have to do all their domestic work themselves like cleaning their rooms and washing their clothes, etc. How can the poor child sit and write? She has her studies too after all. It is quite clear any way that she is safe and well".

They would repeat such consoling remarks to themselves and attend to their domestic routine. Mr. Paranjpye's daily pooja* grew longer and longer as weeks passed into months and a new year came. They had not seen their beloved child now for a year or heard from her.

The agony became unbearable and Mr. Paranjpye, who had been ashamed to tell friends that they had not heard from Abhilasha, at last asked his Chief in his old office who had been kind to him what he could do. Mr. Paranjpye told him that he had been assured that she was safe and well, but was only worried why the child, who had no one else in the world and who was full of love for them in her heart, did not write to them. The boss told him that he might write a letter to the External Affairs Ministry of the Government of India and they could get some information about Abhilasha from the Indian High Commission in London.

Mr. Paranjpye took this kind gentleman's help to write a highly emotional letter to the Government and received a prompt reply that the matter was receiving consideration. But no further letter came and the poor

* Hindu ritual worship.

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man, this time on the advice of the British Consul, wrote a direct appeal to the British Home Office and received a reply that Miss Abhilasha Paranjpye had lived in Oxford for about a year and had, regrettably, earned an unfavourable record. Despite continuous absence, her name had been kept on the rolls as, during the first few months, her tutors had found her a brilliant and hard-working student. She had thereafter absented herself and her present whereabouts were unknown and efforts were being made to trace her.

The poor old man and his wife were completely broken to get this news about their beloved daughter whom they had no reason to suspect of any kind of delinquency. Mr. Paranjpye's health had been declining with anxiety and sleeplessness and, at 65, he could not by any means call himself young. As for his wife, grief had frozen into silence and she hardly spoke to anyone and merely heard all the hopeful assurances her husband had to tell her.

The next communication, which came to them, was from the Government of India saying that the authorities concerned in London had got information from British Intelligence that Miss Paranjpye was understood to have joined a group of revolutionaries in Northern Ireland. Mr. Paranjpye was asked to intimate whether they had any idea of her associates in Bombay.

Mr. Paranjpye wrote an angry reply to the Indian Government official saying that he had no doubt that all their intelligence reports amounted to nonsense and they must have got information about some other girl. Their daughter, Abhilasha, had no interest in politics and she would be too scared of rough people to associate with any kind of revolutionaries. Their child was

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too innocent to be involved in any such activity. They solicited assistance to know whether the child had become demented on account of hard work in the University and had run away. Mr. Paranjpye once again assured the official, who had written to him, that the person they had referred to could not be their daughter.

Mr. Paranjpye at last told his wife that he would try to go to London himself in search of his girl, and, for three months, he was busy meeting various people in this connection. Finally, he came home one day and said this was not possible. The procedures about going, like getting a passport, appeared impossible and it would cost Rs. 10,000 to go to London and be there even for a few days. The Government of India, further, he said bitterly, "would not allow fathers to spend so much of the country's scarce foreign exchange to look for vagrant daughters".

It was four years now since Mr. Paranjpye and his wife had returned from the air port unable to get a last look before Abhilasha boarded her plane. They had become accustomed to their lonely, gaping house and the postman no more found them anxiously waiting for him. The old man, older every day, would go to Abhilasha's room, arrange and re-arrange her books and take her photographs one after another from the wall, dust and wipe them and put them back again. He would then sit on her cot for hours in silence with his own thoughts until his wife would come and call him for his food. He would now and then take a walk to her college, sit on the lawns in the evening and walk back home. Carefully placing his walking stick in a corner, he would tell his wife, "Some day God will open His eyes and Abhilasha will come back to us".

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It was five years since Abhilasha left their home, when one of their neighbours brought a newspaper to them and told them about a news item which mentioned one Abhilasha who had been arrested near Shillong with a group of Naxalites. The news report made a sensational story of violent clashes between the police and some armed terrorists. Fifteen people had been caught with all kinds of modern weapons and there were two women with them. One was a foreign girl and the other was an Indian identified as Abhilasha Paranjpye.

There could not be two Abhilasha Paranjpyes in the world. The poor old man read and re-read the newspaper and was too shocked to speak. His wife was in the kitchen. With the best will in the world, he could not bring himself to doubt the veracity of the news. Yet, his poor, dear child ! How could she be mixed up with terrorists? He walked up and down and then sat still and became restless again, until his wife enquired if anything had happened.

He told her that there were all kinds of reports in newspapers and there was a mention of one girl, Abhilasha, but it was absurd that their daughter should be in India without their knowing it. Reading the newspaper again, he explained that this was about a gang of terrorists in Assam and, among the two women arrested, one was an Indian girl whose name was Abhilasha.

The mother was silent and was no doubt stunned. She stood there for several minutes and then suddenly turned to the kitchen and her husband heard that she was at work again as if nothing had happened.

He slowly walked up to her and asked whether he should go to Shillong and see whether there was any

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truth in the story. His wife told him he could go if he thought it necessary. She got on to her work again.

The poor man rummaged his boxes and collected a few odd things he could get. Shillong, he had heard, could be very cold and it was November now. He went to the Post office and took some money form his Savings Account and, after a sad leave-taking with his wife when both of them spoke little, he went to the station.

In Shillong, he had not much difficulty in putting his little box in the railway "Left Luggage" office and, the same day, he contacted the police who promptly confirmed the press report. He was told that undertrials could not be contacted as the case was being processed. Mr. Paranjpye told them the story of his daughter but the police officer brushed it aside saying that this was a common story nowadays. Apart from children of poor people like his, the ranks of desperadoes were filled with children of even very rich people and, once they got mixed with violent gangs and got caught, the law had to take its course.

The old man wanted to know whether he could leave a letter for his daughter and got the reply that these undertrials were lodged in a separate section in a jail whose location could not be disclosed and no communication was allowed with the outside world. The trial, he said, would come after the investigations had been completed and this might take at least two months.

Completely broken and nearly distracted, with no money and in a strange place, Mr. Paranjpye decided to return to Bombay and console his wife. After two months, they would come back and, as he had no doubt that it was all a mistake and Abhilasha had been implicated by some people who had taken advantage of her

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innocence, he believed, she would be released and they could take their child home. "No, she is not a child now. She will be twenty-seven on the fourth of February!" he mused to himself.

Mrs. Paranjpye heard the news silently and told the old man he should not spoil his health worrying, since his daughter was with God. They could certainly go to Shillong if they could see their daughter. As this kind of passivity, very foreign to her usually emotional nature, had become the settled manner of his wife, Mr. Paranjpye said nothing beyond referring now and then to the need for keeping her room ready for Abhilasha. He told his wife that they should persuade her to marry. Twenty-seven was by no means a young age to settle down and they too were getting old—quite old . With her beauty and her wonderful college background, there would be young men galore for her to choose from. Their poor child, she must have passed through a terrible experience getting mixed up with gangsters. How this could happen to her he could not imagine.

Two months later, Mr. Paranjpye and his wife, tattered and shattered after travelling for three days from Bombay reached Shillong. Enquiries showed that they should go back to Gauhati as the police there were conducting the case. They learnt in Gauhati that the trial was proceeding inside the jail and was held in camera. Mr. Paranjpye asked whether he could see the defence lawyers and was told that the undertrials had refused outside legal aid and were conducting their own defence. Did they have any news about his daughter? They had no information.

Considering their pathetic financial condition and their grief, the railway officials permitted them to stay

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on in the station waiting room till the police could give them some definite news. During a subsequent visit, they met an Englishman, who, they understood, was a relative of the foreign girl and was also like them waiting for information.

For some ten days, Mr. Paranjpye paid his routine daily visit to the police station and his wife prepared some food. Eventually, one day the police officer informed him that the trial was over and sentence would be pronounced in a week. And Mr. Paranjpye kept telling his wife that their girl would be freed next week and they should be able to return home.

The verdict, when it finally came, was different from what Mr. Paranjpye had fondly expected. Abhilasha had been sentenced along with several others to rigorous imprisonment for life. The police officer informed him that the prisoners were being removed to Kashmir to serve their sentence and, before they were taken away, they would be allowed to meet their relatives, if any.

Mr. Paranjpye rushed to the railway station with hope in his heart. Strangely, the harsh and final character of the blow failed to register on the old man whose mind was now filled with the hope of seeing his daughter again. He was in great excitement. He told his wife that, if they could rush, they could meet their daughter once more.

When they came to the police station, the police officer offered to take the miserable old couple to the jail in their van to meet their daughter.

They waited there patiently not feeling hunger or thirst in the hope of having a look at Abhilasha again. Several others came and were taken in to meet their relatives and brought back. They waited for their turn.

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It was dusk when the warder came and told them that he was sorry they would have to go back disappointed. Their daughter had declined to meet them.

Mrs. Paranjpye, unlike her husband, remained silent. But, the old man cried, "I want to see her. She is my child—my child, you know, just like your child. I want to see her".

The warder placed a hand on his shoulder. "Yes, I understand", he said. "But you cannot meet her unless she wants to meet you. That is the rule".

"If you wait here, you may perhaps see her. The vans will start moving to take them to the train for Pathankot".

There was nothing else to do. Mr. Paranjpye waited and his wife waited with him. And, in one of those black jail vans, their beloved Abhilasha was taken away. They did not know which was "their" van!

On returning to the station, Mr. Paranjpye told his wife that he did not want to go back to their house in Bombay and they would return to Surat where they had lived before they had Abhilasha. And so, at Bombay station, they waited for the train for Surat.

A loud speaker announcement alerted Mr. Paranjpye. "Did they say Abhilasha?" he exclaimed. They pricked their ears and the announcement came clearly in English.

"Your attention please, your attention please. A child answering to the name of Abhilasha has got separated from her parents and is missing. Anyone finding the child may kindly bring her to the Station Superintendent. The child answers to the name of Abhilasha".

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Mrs. Paranjpye heard the announcement repeated in Marathi and suddenly burst into tears. Convulsions shook her body, until gently embracing her, her husband slowly guided her to the train for Surat.

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ANSWERING TO THE NAME OF ABHILASHA

II

She was not a beauty such as a painter might call perfect, but you would not take your eyes off her once you had a look. It was nature with all its freshness and variety cast into one single human form.

I saw her from a distance in dim light among a crowd of people. She was, as far as I could judge, a young woman of twenty or so, with a face blending a million moods of joy, excitement, anxiety, grace and vivacity and a figure for a girl nature could not have improved upon. Her long plaited hair was hanging at the front on one side partly making up for the saree which slid away from her shoulder. She was of medium height and, in that whole crowd, which included both men and women, she looked strangely beautiful and I stood transfixed for several minutes with the air travel bag in my hand. Perhaps, stung by the telepathic rays of my stare, she turned back and I hurriedly moved up to my weighing counter.

"Have you checked your luggage, Miss Paranjpye?". The voice was that of an Englishman and I turned in surprise to see who this Miss Paranjpye could be. He was addressing that beautiful girl who had earlier attracted my attention. Paranjpye! the same name as mine but not quite a southerner like me. I decided that the name must be a coincidence. We had no relatives in Bombay. I paused a little indifferently, but her voice rang out: "Yes, thank you, Mr. Bannerman. I have to thank you for a whole lot of help for

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a novice like me set for an international flight. I am afraid we are all going to miss you in London".

So, she was going to London too and I felt that we were going to be thrown into each other's company a lot. But I could not wait. When the final clearance had been given after the unavoidable formalities which kept all of us hurrying through, I took the opportunity to move into their group and introduce myself as Dr. Paranjpye going to London.

She looked at me a little startled but pleased when someone exclaimed, "we have a Miss Paranjpye with us in our group. Are you cousins by any chance?"

She was the only woman in the company. I turned round to look at her and jocularly remarked: "This is my cousin, I suppose". She blushed and was greatly embarrassed and said: "Indeed, this is a surprise. I don't know of any cousin in Bombay and, in Surat, which is the place I come from, we were the only Paranjpyes, I suppose we were some kind of immigrants there. I have always had an idea that we were all the Paranjpyes in the world, but for some distinguished knight 'Sir so and so' I had heard mentioned".

"Well, there are quite a few more Paranjpyes in India, and my family is an evidence of it". I replied laughing "Are you going to London too?"

"Coincidence after coincidence!" said Abhilasha, (I learnt only later that was her name) "Are you a member of the Commonwealth group too?"

"Never had such luck", I rejoined. "I am a doctor from Mangalore going for higher studies".

The call came through on the loud speakers for us to board our buses and the big crowd of us, some 200 and odd, stamped through across the tarmac. I offered to take Abhilasha's heavy bag and she replied smiling:

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"I must not start leaning on someone even before I start the journey".

In the plane, we were seated far from each other but Abhilasha raised her palm when I looked back for her. After the plane had taken off, I could not stay long in my seat. I began fidgeting and looking back and finally asked my neighbour, an elderly foreigner, whether he could do me a favour. Introducing myself as Dr. Paranjpye from South India, I told him that a cousin of mine had also boarded the plane from Bombay for London. If he would forgive me, could he exchange his seat with hers? I showed where Abhilasha was sitting and, seeing her, he could not refuse. "By all means", he said, "In any case, I am going only as far as Hamburg. So you can very well have each other's company to London".

He got up immediately and took his over-coat and I took up his bag for him. He whispered to Abhilasha: "It is horrible for the Airline to keep two cousins so far apart. May I give my place to you, Miss Paranjpye?"

Abhilasha looked at me somewhat surprised that I should have played a trick on the gentleman. She got up smiling, thanked him and came forward with me to her new seat.

"You seem to be a quick one to plan things out", she told me in a chiding tone, "I am glad though".

"Well, God seems to have planned earlier that we should be on this plane. So why not be graceful to Him and be together?"

For the first time I heard her silver laugh. She had a way of raising her shoulders and bringing her chin down as she laughed. These early images I can never forget and, to some extent, she retained these

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mannerisms though her social environment abroad changed her a great deal in later years.

"Now, what shall I call you"? I began, "It will be absurd to be addressing each other as Dr. Paranjpye and Miss Paranjpye. My full name is Ram Mohan Paranjpye and can it be Mohan to you?"

"You do sweep me off my feet, yet it does not appear that I can help it", she said with a suggestion of the same kind of laugh, "I am called Abhilasha at home".

"What a name!" I exclaimed. "Desire—that seems the final philosophical verdict of man on woman".

"May I confess one thing, Miss Abhilasha ?" I continued, "Ever since I saw you, I became determined to be friends with you. But as I came to know your name and your destination, I decided that God did not mean it to be otherwise?"

"Too much of God on your lips for a very designing young man," she replied smiling. "You have imagination, perseverence and poetry. A palmist would say you are an actor".

"God forbid", I exclaimed.

"Ha, there you go again—God", she cut in.

"Abhilasha you are too cute for me. Let us know each other. Tell me something about yourself".

"There is not much to tell really. We are a big family of three people—big because each of us is so important to the other two. My parents are very old. My father, Kailash Chandra Paranjpye, has been in a small private job and we are somebody only to ourselves whether in Surat or Bombay, unless I be called a V.I.P. After all, my parents shifted to Bombay on my account, I won a Commonwealth scholarship and am now flying in a giant aircraft, the first member of the family to do

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so, and also the first member of the family to find that Paranchpyes are not as few as I thought!"—the silver peal came again.

"I must confess I come from a very different set up", I replied a little sombrely. "You may call us rich, I suppose. My father is a wellknown doctor who is now in Bangalore with a very upper class nursing home of his own, having shifted from Mangalore to make his talents available to more people and, incidentally, as you may guess, to make his practice more paying. Don't get hurt, Abhilasha, because you have been speaking about your being sombody who is nobody. We are stinking rich. My father is sending me to England on his own account to specialize in Neuro-surgery. He wants to expand the Nursing Home, though, even now, we have a six figure income.

"But would you believe me, cousin,—may I call you that for a change?" I continued, "I want to be on my own and what I want to do in England is to learn about the application of advanced medicine to the really poor clientele. I have seen enough of money. I want a change—a bit of adventure, I suppose. One reason why I am being packed off to London is that my father feels I am becoming a disciple of *Vinobha Bhave who lives on curds and ***Padayatra*".

"An idealist, eh?" quipped Abhilasha. "I am not one and I won't say 'Thank God' like you. I have had no time to think much on my own and am not a philosopher, yet my only philosophy is to live a life which would please my father and my mother who have spoilt me sufficiently. That is the world of the Surat Paranjpyes—three concentric circles and I am

* Well-known Gandhian.
** Processional walk.

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the central one. I am fenced round with my mother's love and then my father's. My only aim is to keep that frame-work in tact. So it has been all these years. The great dawn for our family will come when I come back and be 'the perfect specimen' of the family—my father's great desire—his real Abhilasha!"

"The theme for an epic poem," I declared, "You will have all my support".

"I don't like the sound of it", she argued, "Do not the cousins part in London to pursue their respective goals".

'That is what you think," I said, "There will be no more partings, my dear. We are going to be in the same plane, for a long, long time, I am afraid".

Abhilasha became reflective and was silent. Except such light banter, we did not have much purposeful conversation thereafter. The air hostesses and the stewards got busy. At Beirut, we got down and roamed around a bit and at Hamburg, the old German gentleman came and took leave of us. "Wish you all the best. You seem to be too sweet on each other that I think the cousinship is going to be of short duration". He shook hands with both of us hoping some day we ought to meet again.

At London, I told Abhilasha I would get in touch with her and we parted in confusion because Abhilasha's group was received by an army of officials and the elite of the Commonwealth Association. They had also scholars coming from other Commonwealth countries. So, I parted from Abhilasha after squeezing her hand and she smiled coyly. There was no bandying of words.

My father had written to several friends in London and they had initially booked a room for me at the

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Savoy. He had evidently thought that I was going to prepare myself to be a star of Harley street. And so did the few eminent surgeons for whom he had given me introduction. I was good in my subject and the first impression I produced was good. But, when I explained to them that my object was not practice for the sake of money (which my father was making in abundance) but to evolve a system to adopt advanced technology for low-cost application in India's villages, they could not understand me and wished me luck. I was eventually recommended to join a college in Sheffield with a big hospital.

But my thoughts kept returning to Abhilasha. I was reluctant to make it appear that I was chasing her because, friendly as she seemed, I knew quite well that Abhilasha had not responded to my efforts to be 'free'. Her tone, in fact, had been to an extent mocking, though, I discovered later, this was part of her style. It was difficult to know when she was earnest and when she was mocking.

After an impatient spell of 48 hours, which kept me contacting important persons my father had asked me to meet on arrival in London, I went to the Commonwealth Association and introduced myself as Miss Paranjpye's cousin—the name was a help—and learnt her address. This was one of the private hotels the Association had engaged to be a hostel for their Commonwealth guests. They were some 60 scholars from different parts of the world including Canada and Australia and many of the African countries.

I found this place, when I reached there, a miniature world resounding with a babel of tongues together with a multi-racial assemblage of young people. My name was easily identified at the Reception office as, eviden-

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tly, Abhilasha had produced a big impression all-round. As her "cousin" Paranjpye, the reception clerk rang up her room immediately and gave me the reply that Miss Paranjpye would come down for tea and I was requested to wait and join her. I took my seat in the lounge looking around and did not notice Abhilasha till she came to my sofa. She was looking extremely smart in a bell-bottom pant and shirt with a cardigan on, her hair put down the same way in a plait hanging down her right shoulder. What a compelling feast to the eyes!

"Hello, cousin", she greeted me with her hand extended. I took it in both my hands and looked into her eyes which made her shift and she sat down.

"Well, well, doctor". She exclaimed clapping her hands gently. "What is the future for the poor people of India waiting for their Neuro-surgeon?"

I remained silent for a while and then said: "Very little hope for them I am afraid. I have found a big distraction, professionally speaking".

She understood my teasing and was quite teasing herself. Then, seriously, I told her that there were all kinds of problems and that I was quite depressed about it. They were advising me to go to Sheffield where there were some specialists who had served in Asian and African countries whose contacts might be useful to me. I was reluctant to go.

Abhilasha, it appeared, had to stay in London for three months so that they could have an opportunity to 'mix' with Commonwealth students and get to know each other's countries. She said that the Commonwealth Association was composed of a number of genuinely dedicated men, dedicated in their own way, though, at times, she felt that the Union Jack and the

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old Empire were still very much in their brain. She found that every one of the boys and girls who had come from different countries had an academically brilliant background and was a delight to talk to.

She also explained that there were some orientation lectures and tours to some national institutions in London, the groups being split up according to their interests and their faculty background.

"We have a busy schedule, it appears, but we are going to be let free on the weekends with an amount for pocket money. The idea is that we may find our own friends".

"Excellent", I said, "so we shall spend the weekends together", I told her. I would come and meet her on Saturday morning.

She told me that it would be a good idea, but she would like to know what the others were doing. Would I give a ring on Friday night?

When we parted, she gave me an envelope to post—a letter to her parents. "They would want to know how I live here every minute of the day and night, barring sleeping hours. By the time I end my course here, I think, I would have written a book to have the title "Britain Inside Out" in several volumes. I have promised to write to them every day, but I find this will be impossible, but an occasional letter with lots of stories would be more welcome to them than two-line health bulletins. Don't you think so? But, when I do think of them, my heart is heavy. You know, my father and mother will feel our house empty without me. If my father loved me less, he would not have sent me. He has denied me nothing. So, when I said I wished to go to London, he readily agreed though I know he must have been miserable. On my side, I

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want to help them. After all, I am their Abhilasha".

I took leave of her with the bulky letter, promising to meet her on Saturday. I felt thoroughly lonely after leaving her and, hoping to forget myself, got into a city bus without asking for its destination. I changed from one bus to another until I landed somewhere near the Savoy. Only late in the night in my bed, I remembered Abhilasha's letter to her parents. I had forgotten to post it and I had carried it in my hand. I must have misplaced it or dropped it somewhere. In utter consternation, I realized that I had lost it. There was no particular place where I could look for it since I had been changing from one bus to another. There was no chance of somebody finding it and putting it in a post-box as the letter was unstamped and I was to have affixed the necessary stamps.

I was in great distress and wanted to ring up Abhilasha's hostel but it was too late in the night to wake her up to speak about my callous mistake. The next morning, the mood passed and I decided that, as Abhilasha would be writing so many more letters to her parents, the loss of one would not much matter. I could have sent a cable to her parents as I had done to my own, but I had not noted their address.

So, I said to myself, Dr. Paranjpye with all his sympathy for the poor people, started equipping himself to serve them with a big lie ! On Saturday, when I met Abhilasha, I did not make any reference to the loss of the letter. Abhilasha was in light spirits. She had shaken off some offers of company and decided to spend the day with me. She was dressed beautifully in a saree and everyone was staring at her as if enchanted as she walked out with me wearing a stole around her shoulders. That autumn, it was pleasant. "If it rains,

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we shall get a raincoat-cum-overcoat. I haven't got one", she said as we got out.

She preferred bus travel, she said, because of her limited pocket money. She said she wouldn't like to spend more money than was essential. "'Mohan", she told me, "it is going to be share and share alike. Please remember this".

The command was imperial but she had prefixed that harsh remark with an endearing 'Mohan' for the first time. We roamed around, just as we pleased, doing a lot of window-shopping. We had a cheap lunch at a cafeteria of her choice. I dropped her back at the hostel after an evening film show. The next day she told me she would come to my hotel and have lunch there.

On Sunday, on my persuasion, she agreed to come in a tourist taxi and we went round the more famous London landmarks—Trafalgar Square, Parliament House and so on. We stood in front of the great Big Ben whose chimes were heard all over the world through the BBC. We went to Hyde Park and saw what was meant by soap-box orators. Abhilasha said she was famished when we reached Savoy for lunch.

Abhilasha was in a great mood and we enjoyed the luxurious lunch provided by the Savoy, the menu including one or two choice Indian curries. We were in such abandon that we spoke freely of love and marriage and the right of men and women to live as they pleased. I could never imagine Abhilasha had such advanced views. I realised only later that this was all child's talk.

We went up to my room on the fourth floor which was a cosy double-room suite. The maroon sofas and chairs with carpets and curtains to match made Abhi-

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lasha exclaim "Fantastic! This looks like the Arabian nights". She looked round and walked into the bedroom saying words like "gorgeous, fantastic" all the time. I was wondering whether the doses of wine she had taken during lunch without knowing what wines could do (she had never tasted wines before) were going to her head. But she was irresistible there, so naive and artless. I led her to my bed room and through age-old guiles, introduced her to the 'free life' she had spoken about.

Later, she sat on the bed with her hair and dress all in disarray and looked at me and burst into tears. My God, I had never seen such weeping in my life and I would never want to see a sight like that again. She was shaking all over. She was hysterical but not making much noise. Gasping for breath with suppressed sobs, she covered her face with her hands and cried. I went to console her and she pushed me away so violently that I lost my balance and fell hitting my head against the wall.

I had been miserable, but now I was a little angry. How could I know that this girl who seemed to know all about the ways of the world was basically an ignoramus? I said nothing, however, and sat on the edge of the bed silently. Her sobs slowly ceased and finally, with a heave, she checked herself and asked me to get out of the room. In a few minutes, she came out as fresh as she had been but for the weariness of her eyes. She had made up her face, tidied up her hair and arranged her saree. She came to my sitting room, went to the mirror and put on her vermilion on the forehead.

Then abruptly she sat down in the chair while I stood leaning on the opposite wall with my hands crossed against my back.

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"Do you know what you have done to me? I can never be the same again—Cousin! Never the same again. How can I ever face my parents? How can I write to them? I have never kept a secret from them. I was their life and breath. Let them never know what has happened to me. You, a doctor and a man of the world, took advantage of my innocence. You can have a good brag, Dr. Ram Mohan Paranjpye".

She stared at me standing speechless for several minutes with her eyes dilated in horror and the beautiful face clothed in silent agony. Her lips were firmly closed and hands clenched. We were both silent, it seemed, for many, many minutes. Finally, she took her bag and, without a look at me, opened the door and walked out.

She left me in a state of stupefaction. Everything she said was true, every word of it. But, how could I understand such utter ignorance of the world from a sophisticated girl who had lived in Bombay, that city of over-mature young ones! Perhaps, she had been only half-conscious after all the wine and the gaiety.

The two of us never met by ourselves after that for several days though I did go to her hostel a number of times and made friends with a few others from India. She was quite often in the group and would introduce me as Dr. Paranjpye who had travelled with us from Bombay, taking care to mention that, though we had the same surname, we had never known each other before. She was occasionally relaxed and I wondered whether she was getting over it.

In a way she was, but it was in a most incredibly stupid way. One night, after a gay dinner and many drinks, an Australian who clung on to me told me that my namesake 'Paranchpay' was a feast and he had her

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in his room for two nights during the week. I shuddered and pushed that man away to his great surprise and dashed out of that hostel while a waiter or two, who lingered, thought I had wriggled myself out of a drunken brawl.

So, that was what had happened. I did not know what to do. It was not even a month since we had reached London. I took a tranquiliser and slept and early next morning, I rang up Abhilasha. She answered me sweetly and asked me whether I wanted to meet her in her room. "Alone?" she added in an extra-sweet tone. I replied I would come round and banged the phone down.

When I went up to her room, she was looking fresh as a daisy and looking more beautiful than ever. It was now my turn to grind my teeth and suppress my bursting fury. She merely sat and looked at me with a smile.

"How are you, cousin Mohan?" she began. "I am afraid I cannot come out with you because we are having a big party on Saturday and Sunday with some British residents here and some Canadians. I have begun to love the white people. As sheer animals, they are hard to beat. You are such a softie, Mohan, booby softie", she crooned.

I raised my hand to slap her but saw her stand still and unruffled, checked myself and went out. No one can know the agony I suffered for the next few days.

The next time. I went to the hostel, I heard Abhilasha was sticking to her room and had became studious again. I did not want to disturb her and every time I went, I was told that Abhilasha was doing fine and concentrating on her academic activities. She had won big kudos at a debate in the "House" which was

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attended by many eminent public men including the Minister for Commonwealth affairs.

I ventured to call her on the phone again one morning and she asked me to come. In her room, I found her books and papers neatly arranged as I would have expected of her from our first acquaintance. We exchanged greetings politely and she asked me whether I could give her an injection to safeguard her. She accompanied me to my room and I gave her an injection that day and another the next day. When I phoned her after that she said she was all right and thanked me for my "humanitarian service".

I asked her incidentally whether she had heard from her parents. She said she wouldn't. "They don't know where I am. They will never hear from me again. They will have plenty of time to forget me. I am dead, dead to my world".

My Sheffield assignment had been waiting for me and I told my sponsors, I wanted to be in London to brush up my studies a bit before I moved for a regular course and work at Sheffield. I had left the Savoy and taken up lodgings with a friend and after a few days moved into a small flat of my own in a building looked after by an efficient landlady. I had written to my father and his indulgenece helped me to stay on in London.

Abhilasha and I were in contact with each other, not as friends or even as acquaintances but as two people who had some kind of an obligation to each other. She was getting on very well with her orientation course, though she went regularly away, no one knew where, for week-ends. She had some good friends in the West Indies team—old Indians who had settled in Guyana, Surinam and other places and, through them,

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met some local residents of West Indian and Indian origin. After all that had happened, I had not the guts to question her about her activities and, to such questions as I asked, she gave very civil replies but making it quite clear to me where I stood. In my mad plight, I began drinking heavily and picked up for nights a co-lodger of easy ways in our building, the landlady shutting her eyes on us considering the liberal payments I was making. I got a big lump sum from my father saying that I had come upon some excellent surgical equipment and would like to buy them before someone else had an inkling about their sale.

To our people in India, such goings-on among their countrymen abroad should seem sad and sordid. Indeed, so it was and I can bear eloquent testimony to this. My own life was a sad and sordid one without doubt. As for Abhilasha, I did not know what had happened to her. Her friends and the Commonwealth V.I.P.s were all praise for her, but I used to repeat the proverb to myself, "Still waters lie deep". I knew something was happening to Abhilasha but had no courage to ask her.

When I went to Abhilasha's room one day, she presented me a beautiful book, "hot from the press" as she described it. She made a parcel of it and asked me to take it home and read it. "It will do you some good. Sometimes, a learner too can teach, my good cousin. Don't show it to anyone. I know I can trust you. No one but a fool makes the same mistake again and I know you are not a fool".

I went to my rooms to see what she had given me. There was no mention about the author, but it was a masterly thesis on the state of poverty and degradation of peoples in India and other countries

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working up to a violent and passionate incitement to violence. In her own hand, she had written "To my artistic cousin from the author, A.P."

My hairs stood on end as I went on reading late into the night the vituperation and the curses and the threats of the inevitability of violence which filled the book. This was the secret of the weekends and the new friendships! The next morning after the maid had come and gone, I tore the book page by page and burnt them and washed the ashes down the flush. This innocent girl had clearly got involved with some dangerous group of terrorists and managed to hoodwink her hosts by her apparent diligence and her physical and intellectual charms.

I was almost in a fit of rage when I burst into her rooms at the first opportunity I had and asked her in a hushed voice what had happened to her?

"You know what has happened to me, cousin Mohan, don't you?" she asked in her usual taunting tone.

"Don't call me cousin Mohan for God's sake" I cried out.

"O, God doesn't quit your foul mouth, cousin", she said in a mild rant.

"You can be hauled up, arrested and imprisoned any moment", I said.

"Yes, only if someone squeals. You wouldn't do it, Mohan, you won't. You can't have me punished—again. Can you?"

I came out of her room barely keeping my good manners. In the lounge later, I learnt that the orientation course was over. Abhilasha invited me for the final 'convocation' ceremony at which she and two others were to be honoured with silver shields for their

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performance and their glowing example to the youth of the Commonwealth as great defenders of its unity and its common interests.

Abhilasha looked at me from the platform and smiled when the citation was being read. She got up and bowed and saluted with folded hands, Indian fashion, when she received the shield. When the gathering dispersed, she came to me with great ceremony and showed the shield which, burning hot under my collar, I saw and admired to everyone's satisfaction.

Before I saw them off in the special transport bus to Oxford, I gave Abhilasha a card containing my address in Sheffield so that she could write to me in case of need. She was staring at me, seated in the bus, with eyes which revealed a strangely grim vacuity hiding great sorrow. My eyes clung on to her but in a much different way than when I first set eyes on her at the Bombay airport. We were still staring at each other with muscles taut on our faces as the departing bus hastened the distance between me and Abhilasha.

True to her promise, Abhilasha wrote to me soon after she reached Oxford. She was in Balliol and I could write to her if I wanted. Beyond a brief acknowledgement, I did not write to her. In fact, we did not hear from each other for several months. It was nearly a year later, I had a brief letter from Abhilasha saying that she was leaving Oxford and I should not write to her any more. "Don't reply" she added in a P.S.

I thought Abhilasha had begun and ended like a dream for me. But she was hovering around somewhere, somehow, for, one day, Britain having allowed Marxist literature to be sold, I saw in one of the bookstalls, a new copy of the book Abhilasha had given me. The author's name was European. The publishers'

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note on the cover made a reference to the incredible research work undertaken by the author before writing the book. Struck by curiosity, I found another half a dozen books by the same author. I bought all of them and read through them in my room. The style and the power of the writing were unmistakable. The author was Abhilasha. The political revolutionaries had gained a powerful pen. There was no doubt any more about Abhilasha's activities.

I had not seen or heard from Abhilasha for a year now. Therefore, I was taken by surprise when one evening I saw her waiting in my room having taken the permission of my attendant to do so saying she was a cousin of mine from India. She was wearing the same bell-bottom pants and attractive shirt she had worn when I first saw her at her hostel in London. She had bobbed her hair in the continental style and was more beautiful than ever having become a little plump and more womanly. I was moved to tears when I saw her. She gently got up, closed and bolted the door and suddenly embraced and kissed me, whispering "All is forgiven and forgotten". It was strange for me that, as a hardened medical man, I was behaving like a child and she like a grown-up man.

She opened the door again, sat in my big lounge chair and crossing her legs, she took out a cigarette case and offering me a cigarette which I declined, began to smoke.

"You must be surprised, Mohan, why I came. I am not in hiding and am not, at any rate yet, a fugitive from justice. Fate brought us together and I am afraid we have to swim or sink together. Looking back on it all, I think what you did for me was to make a

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woman of me and I hope I shall make a man of you—yet".

She told me that she was very tired with travelling and writing and would like to rest for a couple of days. Could I make some arrangements for her at Sheffield?

I told her this could be done. I went to the matron and inquired whether she could find a room for a cousin of mine who had suddenly landed from London. She might be there for a day or two, as she had to get back to London and then India. The matron agreed and sent me word a little later that the room was ready for Miss Paranjpye. Abhilasha had only a small overnight bag with her. She went to her room and, after freshening up and wearing a new pant and shirt with a blue pull-over, joined me for dinner. She talked about Oxford and her disillusionments there. The last 18 months or so, she said, had completely changed her and she said she would now look forward rather than back at a history which represented a dead past. After dinner, we came back to my room and she stayed the night with me. We were both now utterly liberated from our sense of sin.

The two days Abhilasha stayed with me were the last happy days of our lives. Before leaving, Abhilasha gave me an ultimatum. Would I join forces with her in the strife to death of the Have-nots against the Haves? With Abhilasha standing before me there with her face holding me to adoration and love, I had nothing but one word: "Done". What did she want me to do? She said I should give up my job and join her in London as soon as possible.

This I did taking a week's time to inform my hospital that I was called away suddenly to India and I had no choice. I had given Abhilasha the address

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of my little flat which I still retained in London. I found her there waiting for me.

The rest of Abhilasha's story is briefly told. We had joined a strong revolutionary underground group which had extensive links in Northern Ireland. Abhilasha and I flew to Belfast with our own passports and we received a six-month hardening course in every form of commando work. By this time, we had come up for official notice in the U.K. Before being caught, our friends helped us to get away to Guyana. From here, we went to Ceylon with new Guyana passports supplied to us and then to Hongkong and China. We were within sight of the Indian border on the north-east with some forty others for three years. Our job was a dangerous one, of supplying all kinds of arms to underground rebels all over Nagaland and Assam. There was every day imminent possibilities of arrest, with the Indian army and security forces strengthened beyond all expectations.

Finally, when it was decided that the time was ripe for us to move in and make a big assault, this was organised. We survived three such commando operations in which we took a big haul of arms and some police officials prisoner. But the game was up when we launched the attack on a big police station. The raid had apparently been expected since one of our prisoners had managed to escape and we were, practically all of us, caught in a trap.

There were no specific charges against individuals among, us, but there was overwhelming evidence about our operations, some of our comrades having broken under third-degree questioning. The authorities, who conducted the cases against us, held us in the category of most dangerous terrorists and we were in fetters all

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the time. Abhilasha was taken for questioning and she later told us she was molested by most of the men some time or other but, by this time, everything was in the game for us.

Before the day we were sentenced, Abhilasha and I ate together when she told me in an unprecedented mood of nostalgia she wondered how her parents were and whether they knew what had happened to her after the first and only long letter she had sent them on reaching London. Then, now hardened by experience and helplessness, I confessed to her the truth about that letter and how that was never posted.

She remained silent and quitely wiped her tears which began pouring from her eyes. This from a 'bloody Naxalite' (as we were called in jail) surprised me. Then she said calmly:

"You know, Mohan, I am for all purposes dead to my parents. Do you know who killed that Abhilasha. It was I. Perhaps, you didn't want to hurt me. But I was hurt fatally. That is what it does to a woman. It is irrational, absurd but that is the truth. The guilt never wears out. One way or another, I have felt I am responsible for whatever happened. I shall have to pay the price. In the ultimate analysis, I must pay. Unto myself, I am the law. So, it shall be". After a time, she repeated as if to herself "Unto thyself, thy law". She told me ominously that night that we would not be together for long. I knew only later what she meant.

The next day, the verdict was announced sentencing all of us to rigorous imprisonment for life. We laughed while the judge pronounced the words, since many of us had expected capital punishment. The police officer in the jail told us cynically we were going

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to be taken to Kashmir and we could enjoy the climate there!

We were sitting together the next morning when word was brought to us that many relatives were waiting to see us. There was some flutter from many corners, but Abhilasha and I sat unexcited. None of our relatives knew where we were. It was, therefore, a shock when a warder approached Abhilasha and told her that her parents were waiting to see her.

She looked at me for a minute in silence and then told the warder to send them away. She would not see them. When we were taken to the railway station in the jail van, Abhilasha sat with her face bent. She did not want to see any one she knew in the outside world.

The final incident happened in the train as we were approaching Patna. Abhilasha had been feeling very ill and was periodically fainting. We were all manacled and guarded by policemen with drawn pistols. Once when it appeared that Abhilasha had collapsed, a police sergeant removed her fetters, after pushing his pistol into his belt, and started fanning her face. Suddenly, Abhilasha sprang like a cat, snatched the revolver and held it right against the man's face. "Release all of us at once, otherwise there will be bloodshed here", she shrieked in a furious command. A shot rang out and Abhilasha fell with the pistol loosely hanging from her hand. She was shot in the chest, gasped a few times and closed her eyes after one last look at me.

Hidden in her pant pocket they later found a two line note: "Thank you for shooting me. I killed Abhilasha and I had to be punished".

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Often in my loneliness thereafter, I would whisper to myself her words: "Unto thyself thy law".

RAM MOHAN PARANJPYE

Written in the Central Prison, Srinagar.

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A CASE OF TRESPASS

You will call it fantastic. Of course, you will not believe it. I could not believe it myself. I was not at all surprised that the Hon'ble Minister did not believe a word of it. He sat there listening with an amused smile on his face, perhaps with a touch of pity that, in this modern world, such incredible things could appear to have any sense of reality.

Yet, there they were, the two foreigners, tall enough for anyone to see, even in a big crowd, impressive, dignified, urbane as the better class of westerners are. They were in their middle age, it seemed, perhaps in their late thirties, well-dressed, not in any formal style, but, normally, as one is accustomed to see them in neat, smart lounge suits. The only peculiar thing about them was their tanned, almost red, faces, showing the tension in their minds. Yet, despite their calm and dignified manner, this was written all over them. Those foreigners there certainly made an odd picture

You must remember that we were in a village, a very backward village, and in the midst of a village crowd, unkempt, rugged and ill-dressed in the sense we in India know it, with a large number of children of all ages. It was not a big crowd, however. Perhaps, some 80 to 100 people were there. The village itself could not have had more than two hundred. There was just one road, passably motorable, jeepable as they call it, available for politicians to tour and canvass votes once in five years. The Minister from Delhi had not intended to go there. He had been told in the little township 12 miles away that there had been two foreigners camping in one of the villages. They had

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brought a man from Bombay to help in their communication in the vernacular. They had come in a van drawn by a tractor-like car and they had been there, by the time the Minister was informed about them, three weeks.

They were described as good people, polite and well-behaved in an understanding way, towards the villagers. They did not embarrass the women, they occasionally gave odd little presents to the children who went crowding round their van very often. All that was said in their favour. The Minister was told he should meet them and try to understand what exactly they wanted.

He was in the midst of a political campaign tour and was accompanied by officials, local political workers and the like and, therefore, though interested to know about the foreigners, he was hesitant to break his tour. But the case the local people made seemed certainly peculiar. Why had these foreigners come to this remote little village, cut off practically from the entire world and almost inaccessible by train and even by road ? And why had they been persistently staying there ? What did they want ? The Minister decided ultimately to go.

That was how the Minister was there, in the small village hut which was called the "School". He sat in the verandah, on something which passed for a stool which was in fact a small, low table. He sat there while the others squatted around him and I stood on one side, being a newspaperman who had come with the Minister. He heard the foreigners with patience, asking them a number of questions. They could not sit. They had some folding chairs in their caravan which had been kept a furlong away. The big wagon,

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nearly as big as a large room with beds and all kinds of modern fittings, could not be got across the river which one had to cross to reach the village. It had a little bamboo bridge which could take small cars and bullock carts but not the heavy trailer the foreigners had. So the little car and the trailer had been stationed beyond the river. It could not strictly be called a river ; it was a little brook, about 10 or 12 ft. wide, more like a narrow canal.

But it was there, a part of the landscape, which kept, it seemed, civilization away. Yes, one would think that of that village. It was certainly untouched by the features of modern civilization. For miles around, you could not see an electric pole. There was nothing like a shop anywhere. There was the small school, actually a one-room hut where one of the local wise men conducted a class for the urchins teaching the three Rs. Thereafter, a few of the boys would move to the little town, 12 miles away, for studying in a regular school. But most of them would soon discontinue their education, come back to the village and join their parents to work in the fields. What an odd picture these two foreigners made in that setting !

They had been told that the Minister would be coming to the village and would like to meet them. They would like to meet him too, they said. They had important work with him if only he could help them.

The Minister plied them with questions and they answered patiently. Their story was, to say the least, mythical. They had come from the United States, they said, by a chartered plane which was waiting for them in Bombay. They had come to the village with a man engaged in Bombay to help them as a translator.

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I shall interrupt this narrative here to disclose some facts (which I gathered later) to explain how the Americans had got there. There had been some hush-hush from the beginning, it would appear, as when this man from Bombay was engaged, he had been specially told not to meddle, not to interfere and not to be inquisitive. He had to give them the help they needed. The Americans paid him lavishly. From what this man from Bombay told me, he really did not have to help the Americans except with regard to the language. Yes, they did not know the language, but they knew everything else. From the airport to the hotel, where he was engaged, there was no problem. But the Indian could not understand how, from there-on, these two Americans did not need any help from him. They went to the Bombay Central and got tickets to a railway station he had not heard of before. This was apparently the point from where they would reach the village. You will have to make a note of it. Who told them that there was a station like this and that from this station, they would have to go to the village 80 miles away? They had not come to India before. When they reached this station, they engaged a car and certainly seemed to know their way about. They asked for little directions here and there and had a number of names on a rough map they had.

"And so", said this translator narrating the story, "we came to the township (that I told you about) 12 miles away. From there, we had to trudge as the car had to stop at that point. We put our luggage in a small house where the people were very kind. They said they would look after their luggage and they were sorry the foreigners had to walk. All this conversation was carried on through me.

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"When we crossed the brook and came to the village, the Americans told themselves, 'Yes, here we are. This is right. Well, we now know what it is'.

If you have been to a village of this type where houses are packed close to each other and where every day is like any other day, you can imagine what sensation the arrivals of the two white men can create. Men, women and children swarmed around. The Americans had not expected this, but a stage had come in their adventure when nothing would surprise them.

"They knew", the translator continued, "they had to tell something to this excited crowd to allay their curiosity. They asked me to explain that they had come looking for some people they had heard about. They would like to meet them all later. In the meanwhile, they would beseech them to leave them alone. The men and women and the children tarried for a while, but, eventually, either over-awed by the foreigners or out of consideration for them, they began to drift away.

"The foreigners patiently lingered near the brook till the crowd had dispersed and then asked me to find out in a roundabout way where Mr. Bhinde and his wife, Roopmala, lived. In a few minutes, we were standing before the house where they lived.

"It became clear to me before long that the Americans were not interested in the man. They were repeating the name Roopmala as if they were familiar with it. I was not surprised, therefore, when the two visitors walked up to the entrance and one of them called in a low but clear voice—Roopmala. The woman came out and looked at them. She was in her thirties, a pretty woman, you would say. Not very fair but not very dark too in complexion, healthy

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as village women are, and somewhat nattily dressed, one may say, for a village woman. It seemed the Bhindes were a little better off than the others. She looked at the Americans with a strange expression on her face. She did not know them, of course. Nor did the Americans know her. But, there was certainly some kind of a strange, mysterious exchange of what one can say, some vibration, I suppose, which made her search in her mind where she had seen them before. Who were they ? She was not frightened or agitated because there was something about them which did almost please her. Yes, she was pleased to see them, so it seemed. The Americans told her through me—you must remember every uttered word passed through me because they didn't know a word of the local language. I had to do the translation.

"They told this woman they had come to take her to America. Appearing suddenly in that way, going up to a woman's house and telling her to her face that they wanted to take her to America seemed incredibly stupid. It was madness. Well, the Americans did not seem to worry about that. For, they did tell that lady that they wanted to take her to America. They said they had come by a special plane to meet her and they hoped she would understand.

"Yes, there came the snag. They thought she would understand, but, she did not. What was there to understand ? She could not imagine. The Americans were surprised. 'Don't you know that we would be coming' they asked her. She poured out in shocked amazement: 'How, who are you, how did you come here, how did you know me, who told you about me, who told you about us, who are you?' She went on asking questions of that type completely dazed and

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stupefied by the sense of familiarity and freedom with which the Americans seemed to speak. For very many minutes, it seemed, she was standing there and the Americans were on the doorstep some six feet away and I was near them. The woman stood a little inside the threshold and, finally, she said that her husband was not in town and he would be coming a week later as he had gone to visit some relatives. She had only her two children with her. (One was in the school in the township and the other, the little one, was playing about in the house.) In any case, she could not talk to them any more, she said. She told them that if they wanted to do any talking thereafter, they should do so with her husband and, further, she could say without any hesitation that she could not understand the fantastic suggestion that she should go to America! 'And with these strangers!' she said in the typical village style, laughing with a sense of incredibility blended with fear.

"The Americans found that this reaction was somewhat off the mark. They had not expected it. They did not tell anything more of course. You remember I had been cautioned not to ask any questions. I should not ask any question, I should not be inquisitive, those were the injunctions they had given me. And good money they had paid me. So I had to keep my mouth shut. But I could see that they were disturbed".

All this was told me, as I said, later, much later, than when the Minister had his meeting with the foreigners. The translator told me that the foreigners then decided not to waste any more time in the village. They walked back to the township, took their luggage, and went by car to the station and back

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to Bombay. They were back in the hotel, frustrated and depressed. They had a week to spare, before they could come back to the village to meet Mr. Bhinde.

"That they had to come back to the village, they made clear to me on the train. They said they could not go back to America immediately. Once in Bombay, they seemed to think that they might have to wait in the village for a considerable time. They got hold of some American tourists, who were travelling around India in their caravan and they were persuaded to sell their vehicle to them. This was a very convenient lodging, so to say, some kind of a mobile house which had a dining table inside, camp cots, little wardrobes on the sides and various appliances and places to keep them—a nice house indeed with electric fittings including a ceiling fan. They brought the caravan to the hotel and packed everything. The Americans had lots of money. That was no problem. They went to the bank in the city and encashed their cheques, took plenty of Indian money and filled the car with petrol and took some to spare. They were off on the journey to the village the next morning. From Bombay, it was around 600 miles. Nasty journey it was, as you may guess. It was September. The sun was hot, though we had crossed the worst of the summer. More or less, they stuck to the road parallel to the railway line. The Americans drove the car taking turns at the wheel.

"I was with them," continued the man from Bombay, "partaking of their food, sharing their little conversation to the extent that was permitted. Occasionally, they asked questions about my family. I could not ask any about theirs. This was banned, you know. They did not have any questions to ask about the country, about the villages, about the railways or any-

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thing in particular. They had only some questions about our philosophy, our saints, our spiritual guides, spiritual people in India, the kind of abnormal, spiritual people whom they thought lived in many places in India. Unfortunately, this was a subject on which I was very weak. I was a city man and I had a hard life making the little money that I needed for my family. But every Indian can talk about their saints and I did tell them odd little things that I knew about our Sankaracharya, Ramana Maharshi and the Yogis of Hrishikesh, Kedarnath, Benares, Ramakrishna mutt and Vivekananda, odd little things like that. It did interest them, though, to anyone else in India, they would have appeared trite stuff indeed, in terms of the vast amount of spiritual knowledge that a really learned man in India could reveal to a foreigner. So, that way, we travelled two days and, on the third day, we were in the village.

"Mr. Bhinde had come two days earlier. On instructions from the Americans, I made inquiries about what had happened during their absence and I learnt from the woman herself that she had told him what had happened. He was wild with anger, to say the least. 'Who were these foreigners.' he had asked, 'to come and speak to you in my absence ?' But, she told him, they could not be blamed. They had come from far away and they had some mysterious reason. They had been extremely polite and decent. They knew very little about him or her. They only knew her name, and they had some kind of a message, in accordance with which they had come and wanted to take her to America. Mr. Bhinde was first extremely enraged. Then he calmed down gradually, and, finally, became a little curious. In any case, he said, he would

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drive the Americans away as soon as they came back. He really thought they would not come back. They were, according to him, some kind of eccentrics and they must have had some funny hallucination. What that was he could not understand. But, it was very strange to him also that these people, who lived thousands of miles away in a far-off country, who had never visited India and never knew anything about India and Indians, should have known their names. He was indeed amazed, though in an indignant way, that they should have come there and spoken to his wife and made their demand that she should go with them, which, of course, was the funniest part of it, the crudest, as it seemed to him. So Mr. Bhinde spent the day somewhat restlessly because he was impatient to meet the foreigners, half certain that they would not come and half curious to know whether they would come again.

"The Americans parked their caravan just across the brook, and Mr. Bhinde did not lose any time. He walked up across the brook and introduced himself to them. He could speak a few words in English like 'Good Morning', 'Thank you'—words like that. He could not carry on a conversation or understand what they said. But he had some pretensions to English in a limited way which was certainly something which marked him high above the level of the villagers. He first shook hands with the Americans because he found them, as his wife had said, very polite and gracious men in their own way. They seemed pleased to meet Mr. Bhinde. Yes, pleased they were, but the translator told me that they were pleased more because they thought that they would finish their business. They looked at him in a peculiar way, somewhat cynically,

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maintaining all the graciousness of sophisticated men. Mr. Bhinde did not want to take them to his house and would have preferred to talk to them there, but somehow it seemed improper and village hospitality always meant people being invited to the house.

"So, he called them and walked with them to his house. This time, they took their folding chairs and asked me to take one too. So, they went up and stepped into the room where there was one of those heavy country cots, apparently where Mr. Bhinde used to sleep. There were two children, both boys, one of the school-going age, apparently the one who was having the education in the town school and the other a toddler playing at home. The Americans took their seats and told Mr. Bhinde that it was difficult for them to explain the entire story. They said that they had been sent by their mother in America to bring this lady to her, Mrs. Bhinde or Roopmala, as the Americans referred to her. Somehow they seemed to like the name Roopmala and they used to utter it quite often. Mr. Bhinde was irritated about it, but there was nothing that he could do.

"Then they told Mr. Bhinde their story. Their mother, they said, one day called them and told them: 'My sons, I am going to make a strange request to you. Please don't ask any questions. You have to help me. Cost and trouble should not deter you from doing this for me. I would have come myself, but the circumstances under which I am making this strange request to you also contain a stipulation that I have to be here. I have to request you to go to India.' She said that their mission was really to meet a lady in India in one of the Indian villages and bring her to the United States, to their house, to her. The young

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men were, of course, taken aback. They had heard of India, as normally Americans heard of it, of the poverty and of political leaders like Gandhi and Nehru. Actually, they had never been interested. They had their jobs, the ranch, and their big business in the city. They had large investments in the United States; actually, they were very rich and their mother was the head of the family. Their father had been dead for some time. Their mother would not give any explanation for her request, so the Americans said. They added, however, that they were goaded to come because there was some mystery about this mission. Their mother was able to jot down on paper various details, with all kinds of names, which were totally unfamiliar, of railway stations, villages and the name, they said, of this lady, Roopmala. She had not first mentioned about Mr. Bhinde. That was why they were a little confused. Roopmala, she had said, was the name of a woman. The men had said that there must be some men in that place. They could not just go and ask for a woman. Then she said she knew the name, but she did not want to mention it. But the two men, who had to come to India said that it would be ridiculous if they were not told all the facts. Only then she gave the name of Mr. Bhinde. Actually, she wrote both the names on a piece of paper and, thereafter, the names of villages, the railway station and other land-marks. She gave them the idea of the distance and the difficulties of travel and, thereafter, she left it to them to make arrangements. She said that they could spend any money, even a hundred thousand dollars, and they could offer any terms to the local people to enable this lady to be moved out and got to the States".

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"You can imagine," said the translator, "how Mr. Bhinde was getting more and more irritated and more and more restless, though his wife, Roopmala, seemed tremendously curious. She seemed to think that these were strange goings-on. The Americans certainly deserved some attention. It was important to know what lay behind all this. But she could not tell Mr. Bhinde in their presence what she had in mind and, you know, in India, this kind of thing is unthinkable. So, she was a little unhappy over Mr. Bhinde's reaction and the Americans said they would meet him again the next day. Meanwhile, he could think about it.

"But, before they went, they said two things which further infuriated Mr. Bhinde. They said that they were unhappy to say it, but they had to tell him that their mother had not wanted him in the U.S.A. To tell a man, a husband, that he had to send his wife with two utter strangers and that he should stay back is some thing which can make a man mad with rage. Mr. Bhinde thought it a revolting, blasphemous and an insulting suggestion. He was furious. He almost raised his hands to assault the two visitors. But, he knew that was not possible because the Americans were big, strong men and further, apparently, the impulse behind them was a strange one. There was certainly a lot of mystery over this whole business. That much became clear to Mr. Bhinde. Here was a very extraordinary situation. Indeed, he was in a remarkably queer crisis, if one could describe it so, because he knew that something had to be done with these people. He could have hurled them out. He could have raised an alarm, called the villagers and told them what happened and they would have driven out the Ameri-

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cans. But somehow, it seemed to him that this situation called for some thought. There was something more in it. Then, the Americans said politely that they had offended him enough, but they had to tell him one more thing. They said that they were willing to pay the price, any price that he would demand, to enable them to take the lady with them. They said he should understand that they had no bad motivation. Both of them were married and they had children back in the States and they had come as emissaries of their mother. And, so far as Roopmala was concerned, their feeling or sentiment towards her was something akin to respect, more than respect, some kind of a veneration as if she was a saint. It was all difficult to describe, they said. They said that their mother was quite old, she was in her late sixties and, when she had spoken of Roopmala, she seemed to speak with great affection and respect. A person about whom their mother had such sentiments, the Americans asked Mr. Bhinde. 'Do you think that we can have any irreverance or base motive? Please remove such thoughts from your mind. We will take her like a goddess to our mother. And you will hear the rest from her.' But in order to compensate—nothing can compensate for the loss of a wife and mother of two children and it will be base, it will be vulgar, to talk in terms of money being paid to release the lady; no, it was not at all that—they wanted to serve him in some way which would attract him or distract him, perhaps, from the void which would face him if his house became empty. They said, he could ask them anything he wanted, anything that money could buy. They would leave it to him what to demand. They only wished that he would consider their unusual request

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with sympathy and understanding. They pleaded that they were speaking on behalf of their mother who might have come but for the extraordinary circumstances which prevented her from doing so.

"Then the Americans got up leaving Mr. Bhinde speechless and walked back to the wagon. We prepared our own food and took our meals in the open sitting on our folding chairs and it was nice to sleep out on the road. There was no traffic, no one came on the road after dark. We had camp cots which we spread out and we had a good sleep. Early next morning, very early, we took our tub to the little brook and collected some water and the Americans had their bath. By seven, we were ready and were back at Mr. Bhinde's. Roopmala received us mutely, but graciously. She had begun to smile, she had begun to take a liking for the Americans. The Americans, on the other hand, were certainly beginning to be attracted by this lady. She seemed in their eyes to be beautiful and I heard them remark in an aside 'How funny. She looks rather like our mother. Does'nt she? Very odd, very odd indeed.'

"The Americans were there that day for a long time. They spoke very little, for what they had to tell Mr. Bhinde had been told and they were waiting for an answer. They left after about two hours of waiting, speaking about this and that. They told them about their ranch in the United States, something about their family. They were four sons and two daughters and all were married. The eldest son was separted from the family. They described their house, their mother, they spoke of their love and affection in their house, of how the mother was the guardian angel of everyone, a powerful, capable, beauti-

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ful woman and the wealth of the family was all with her. They had to get their directions from her. Their father had died some years earlier and the mother had taken in hand the business which did not feel the change in stewardship. So capable was their mother. These things were interesting to Mr. Bhinde, but it made him nervous and fidgety. What did all this mean to him, he asked, warning me not to tell them. But I passed the question on to them later. They told Mr. Bhinde in reply: 'Well, what all this means to you is that you are coming to know of a family, a strange family which has some kind of kinship with you. What kind of kinship we cannot tell, because we do not know.' But this much was clear to them from their mother, namely, that there was some kinship; otherwise, why should they come flying several thousand miles away to that village. Mr. Bhinde was confused, agitated and nervous and he had begun to sweat. He looked at his wife and was in some kind of anguish. He had been brought into a miserable situation. How to get rid of these foreigners? They had promised him money, any amount of money, but Roopmala and his children ? What a proposition that he should sell his wife? Did they mean that he should sell his wife? What a thought! That mortified him and there was no question of politeness any more. So he said, he had some work to do and the Americans might attend to their own. They understood that he was very impatient and they left.

"From then on, the relationship became more and more embarrassing. Mr. Bhinde would not even receive them. They were not asked to come into the house. Mr. Bhinde told them he could not talk to them any more and he had nothing to tell them. They could

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go to their mother and ask her why she had sent them. But the Americans did not register the affront. That seemed very strange to him. They coolly walked away to their wagon, but they somehow felt that they would still be able to take Roopmala with them because their mother had spoken with great conviction and faith. Nevertheless, it was becoming obvious that the interlude was becoming increasingly fruitless and the embarrassment was growing except that, for Roopmala, the situation appeared to have a certain fascination. It was odd, therefore, that, modest, gracious and shy as she was, like any Indian village woman, she walked up to the wagon one afternoon and started a conversation with me. Without replying to her, I called the Americans who were inside the wagon. They came out and I told them that Roopmala was there. She did not ask for them. The Americans were pleased with her for coming to meet them. One of them was inclined to greet her with a present and went inside the wagon, but the other, the elder man, called him back and said: "No please. It will lead to trouble". So they spoke to Roopmala and invited her to see the wagon and said this was how they travelled in the United States and went for excursions with the children for weekends and so on. She was happy and cheerful as if there was a strange spiritual bond which dragged her unconsciously to them. Anyway, that was the impression that I had at the time."

By the time the Minister came, the breaking point had been reached. So, the Americans decided to put their problem to the Minister who, like the others, was amused and stupefied. Of course, the Americans did not tell all these facts to the Minister. (As I said, these are facts which I gathered later from the trans-

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lator). They merely said that they were on a rather odd, they would admit, even a crude mission. For some reason, their mother would not disclose why she had sent them to bring this lady, Roopmala, to her. They could not explain how their mother had known about her. They could not also explain how she was able to tell them about this village. Their mission was certainly a very queer one and their only excuse was that there seemed to be something supernatural behind it all. They appealed to the Minister for sympathy in their plight.

I stood there watching their faces and I could not believe such a ridiculous tale. Yet, there was the fact in the shape of the two foreigners who were articulate enough to tell us, quite rationally in terms of language and expression, what they wanted. Beyond this, they said, they could not say anything. The Minister asked what did they want of him. They said, "You please request Mr. Bhinde to accept our suggestion and send this lady to the United States". The Minister, in obvious annoyance, now asked them whether if two Indians or even two white men from England, had crossed the Atlantic to their house and told them to send one of their women with them, would they not hound them out straightway? The Americans bowed their heads. They said they would. Then, asked the Minister, how did they dare approach him with such a proposition? The Americans replied that they were sorry that there had been a mistake. They had the impression that Roopmala knew the other side of the case, which their mother knew and would not tell them. They expected that they had only to come to India and Roopmala would accompany them.

The Minister said that, in any case, all this seemed

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fantastic and he would not intervene. This looked like a fairly tale and it would be certainly ridiculous and foolish if any man in his senses were to make such a demand and he, as a Minister of the Government, would become a laughing stock in the country if he were to advise them in any way except to ask them to take their chartered plane as early as possible and get back to the United States lest they be attacked by the villagers. He said that the government would certainly not allow the two foreigners who had come as tourists with tourist visas to indulge in such an activity. He said that he would give 48 hours to them to take proper leave of the man and woman with whom they seemed to have some kind of "transcendental relationship" which was inscrutable to common lay minds. The Minister got up and shook hands with the foreigners and wished them luck for a peaceful journey back home. Rather cynical he was, but no one could have done better. The Minister walked back and the foreigners stood there in front of the school without uttering a word. For the first time, it seemed, they had begun to lose hope. They had been in India nearly a month. The next day, when they went to Mr. Bhinde's house, they spoke to Roopmala. Mr. Bhinde did not object, because he had made up his mind that that would be their last meeting.

After the Minister left, I stayed on. I got completely absorbed in this fantastic human story. I sent a telegram to my Editor that I had a mystery story which would make world news. I told the Minister that I had rather stay on and see this story to the end. The Minister smiled and agreed and said that he could not get me the transport back to the city but, I said, we were accustomed to rough going and I would

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manage. So I stayed on. I had not much money with me, but there was no question of anything stopping me. I tried to strike a friendship with the translator, but it was difficult with the Americans watching him all the time. The next day, I spoke to the Americans themselves.

I told them I had enough facts to make a sensational story, but I was willing to give them a chance to give me all the facts so that I could decide whether any harm would come by disclosing it to the public. If I were taken into confidence. I assured them, nothing would appear in print till the story was ended and the Americans were back home. They understood what I meant. They said they had little choice. In any case, they did not want me to speculate and make their stay in India unpleasant and difficult. They qualified their remark about staying in India by saying that it was not their intention to stay on in India for the moment. They had decided to leave, but they knew they would be back here very soon and, if I were to let out the story with a colour which might prejudice their future visit, it would be impossible for them to end their mission successfully.

That was frank talk between us and I assured them that, till they agreed, I would not tell the story to anyone. I would not take notes, I would not keep anything in writing. I would store up the facts in my mind and, if and when they gave me the "okay", I would tell the story to the world. That was a contract. They shook hands on it. Then they told the translator that he had their permission to speak to me and reply to any questions that I might ask and that I should be told accurately, without any colour, exactly what had happened.

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So, that is how I came to know this amazing story of the mysterious Americans and how they came to India. It took us well into the night when this dazed man from Bombay told me in his picturesque English about the various events and odd little bits of information he had gathered and his own impressions —what the Americans had told him, Mr. Bhinde's reaction and Roopmala's own reaction which was really somewhat tantalising.

The next morning, the Americans said that they were packing off. They dressed for the journey, went up to Mr. Bhinde's house and told him they were leaving. They apologised for the unhappiness and irritation they had caused him. They took one last, long, lingering look at Roopmala. I was there with the translator. It was a very strange, silent meeting. The Americans stood petrified. Roopmala looked at them and gradually her eyes assumed a far away look and, as if she had some uncontrolable emotion, tears welled up in her eyes. She turned away and walked into the house. The Americans turned also and walked away.

That was the end of the story, it seemed.

But two weeks later, I got a telegram from Bombay, from the translator. He said that the Americans had come back to the city and they had brought their mother with them. He informed me that I might come to the village if I cared. The Americans would not object. I thought this was very honourable on the part of the foreigners who had known me only for a short time. It seemed that they wanted to honour their contract with me because I had honoured mine. That was all. I took the next train to the village and I was there before the Americans came.

They had parked their trailer-wagon in a safe

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place in Bombay before they went to America. The old lady could not undertake a long journey by road, especially the Indian roads about which the sons had told their mother. They came by train, therefore, and the wagon was brought by a hired chauffeur. It was there at the station when the train steamed up. The old lady and the two sons came out, got into the wagon and they came up to the village, to the same old place near the brook. Mr. Bhinde had not been informed, but this time he was in the village. I was there, as I said, before the Americans came and I was waiting for them near the brook. Within ten minutes of their arrival, the lady came out of the wagon fully dressed. She was in a highly emotional state. The sons did not expect their mother to be out so soon and they thought she had just come out to see the lie of the land, but it was not so.

The old lady said that she would like to go to Roopmala at once. The men said that they would accompany her and very soon in a small procession, we walked to the house of Roopmala. The translator walked with them and I behind them. The lady was at the van. Some fifty feet before we reached the house, she stopped and told the men: "My sons, you must be prepared for a shock. You must have guessed by now that I am being controlled by supernatural forces. I may not be in a position to explain to you. In case I am not able to talk to you after I meet her, I have left a note in my box in a sealed envelope. You are free to open and read it". She was crisp, abrupt and sharp. She looked at them, it seemed as if for the last time, somewhat pensively and then walked over to the house.

Nobody had to tell her which was the house to

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which she should go. One had to ascend three steps and then a further two steps to get into the front room of Roopmala's house. Even though she was very weak to climb steps, the old lady firmly walked up and stepped into the room and looked at Mr. Bhinde who was seated on his cot. By this time, I had rushed in to see what was happening. I was a newspaper reporter after all. I could not wait in politeness. I gate-crashed. I was in the room with the old lady and I did not miss how that woman looked at Mr. Bhinde with hate in her eyes. Hate, I tell you, such as I had never seen before. She hated him. Her eyes spouted fire. She did not say a word. She kept her jaws tight. The man could not understand. She was a tall woman, frail and thin, but she had eyes which rolled in fury. She looked at him and was silent. Then, she turned and called 'Roopmala'. Roopmala apparently knew of the visit but was hesitant, it seemed, to come out. There was an air of great tension. The old lady called again 'Roopmala', the second time very sweetly, affectionately, as if she was familiar with the name Roopmala. Roopmala walked into the room, it seemed almost in a trance. That voice had done something to her. The old lady rushed to her, embraced her and said: "Mother! mother, my mother. Here I am. You would not come to me. So I came. I had to come. Pappa told me not to come here but I had to come. I had to see you".

Roopmala was taken aback, it seemed, and she sank down and collapsed. Moments later, she opened her eyes and looked wild. Then she moved and began to stroke the old lady's hair as if she was her child. "Jennie, my Jennie, my Jennie", she said in a low

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mumbling tone. "Why did you come, why did you come, why did you come. Good-bye, Jennie". That was all. Roopmala fell back. She was dead.

Mr. Bhinde was watching the scene in stunned silence. Everything had happened so suddenly. He had heard his wife speak English, just like that old woman! He could not believe his ears. Was this his Roopmala? He could not understand anything. The old lady was hugging Roopmala and sobbing. And, in a few moments, she too fainted and fell. The two Americans separated them. The old lady was carried to the cot. Roopmala was dead. It was then that Mr. Bhinde recovered from the stunning effect of that drama. He began to shout and rave. The villagers gathered and saw what had happened. They asked innumerable questions. They abused the Americans. They said this would be a police case. The government must be told, the Minister must be asked to come and all kinds of things.

The old lady lay unconscious on the cot. We gently carried her to the wagon. Roopmala was left with her weeping husband and helpless children. Tragedy had fallen on the house all of a sudden. The old lady did not regain consciousness. They wanted to put her inside the wagon, but heat was coming on and they felt it would be better if she lay in the open. The camp cot was drawn out and she was put under the shade of a tree near the brook. They waited. Then, she opened her eyes. They thought she would accost them. She did not. She merely stared at them. They called her. She did not respond. She did not understand, it seemed. She did not seem to register what was happening.

I was a silent and dazed witness. Nobody could

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do anything. Some time passed this way. The villagers gathered and Roopmala's body was removed. There was grief and tragedy. The whole village was in an uproar. Nobody understood what was happening. It seemed the villagers would attack the Americans. But they knew the old lady had also suffered a shock and was perhaps dying. Then, I made the suggestion that it was best, to calm minds and to restore peace, to read out what was in the note. Otherwise, I warned them, the villagers would break into violence and there would be hell to pay. The Americans agreed. They brought the envelope. It was torn open and the note inside was taken out. One of the brothers then read it in a low voice. The old lady said:

"I am too weak to tell you, my sons, all that has happened. But I must tell you that the whole thing began with a strange dream. My father came to me in my dream, not once, not twice, but, every night for two months. He was coming to me and telling me that he had no peace, that he was in torture because my mother was living with the man who had betrayed him and his wife, that is, my mother, during their life time. My father told me that my mother had been attracted by that man, but she had been true to my father and had loved him to the end. And she loved her children, but it appeared that fate had re-united her in her new life with the man my father hated and my mother did not prefer to my father in her earlier life.

"There is a story which has been my secret these many years. My father and he were partners. My father built up the business with his enterprise. The other man stayed on in the office with the accounts. It was not until it was too late that my father realised that he was a crook and an embezzler and he had

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involved my father in numerous kinds of falsification of records which would have landed them in jail before long. But this was not what brought the end. My father could have managed to rectify it all, but that vicious man struck at my father's heart by accusing my mother. She had given this man her company off and on, for, after all, they were friends and partners, but my father loved my mother deeply and he knew that she worshipped him. He had no fears about that. However, when that man made that ugly suggestion, my father was in a fury. In a wild fit of anger, he rushed at the sneering man who was seated on the window sill and there was a scuffle. He fell out four floors down. It was, of course, an accident, but my father was convinced that he had killed him. He was not himself thereafter. He told no one, but began giving me directions to set right the business with the help of friends whom he named. He began drugging himself and started fading away. He told me everything when the end came. No one else knows to this day. He enjoined me not to tell my mother. I tried to save him, but he had gone too far and he told me that it would be of no use. He died before the doctor arrived. My mother was in great grief and, in fact, did not recover from it. She followed him to the grave in a few weeks. The secret has remained with me, known only to me all these years. Now, my sons, you know it. My father has made it unavoidable. How he expected any problem to be solved by recalling my mother to an old life, I could not understand. But, he told me that I must get her away from that man. "If you do not do it", he threatened me, "I shall haunt you all your life because I am in great suffering".

"I did tell him in my dream that this was a new

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life. He had no business to intervene, that her life now was a new life. It was a case of trespass from one life into another. He should rest in peace. But he would not hear me. He said "You must bring her back here. She will come if you call her". On another occasion, he said: "You should not go to India. Send Eddy and Nick to bring her, that will be enough". He would come again and again every night. It was a dream, but for me, even during the day, he became a living presence. He was clearly in great anguish. His face was exactly as I saw him last in life before he shut his eyes with a smile breaking through the agony apparently bidding farewell to me. As long as he lived he was not only my father, but my friend and companion. I could not bear to see him suffer. He would come and tell me in small bits every time, how and where my mother lived. Roopmala, that was her name now, he said, and she was beautiful. He loved her still. He described the village, the house and that man whom he hated. I could not bear this agony night after night, and the misery which was written on my father's face. I could not tell you all this because, for one thing, it would be betraying my father who had asked me to be silent, as he said everything would be clear in the end. So I sent you to India, but Roopmala would not come. My father had not evidently thought of this possibility. He was mixing up the two worlds and the two lives. He was blaming me continuously. He blamed both of you. He said you could not manage, that you had mishandled. My pleadings were in vain. He was accusing me all the time, but he was insistent, however, that I should not come to India. He repeatedly told me, 'You don't go there'.

"But there was no point in sending both of you

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to India again. You told me you had not only failed but would fall foul of the law in India. There was no chance of Roopmala coming. I sought to appeal to my father and looked for him in my dreams, but he never came except to glare at me. So I decided to come. I sought to appeal to my father for advice and looked for him in my dreams, but he never came again. And that was how I came here. Now you know what happened. I feel that my father wanted to separate his wife from her new husband. He could never convince himself that Roopmala was another woman and that this was another life for her. I myself thought that he was interfering too much in her new life, out of bounds for him. But he did not heed me. I felt I had hurt him by not heeding his appeals. So I decided to come and try to take this woman back with me. I do not know what will happen. I cannot anticipate. But I fear that this story is not going to have a happy ending. That is all."

The Americans folded the letter, put it back into the envelope and they went to their mother. There was no response. She stared at them blankly. I explained some bit of it to the villagers who then knew no one was to blame. They felt helpless and began to pity the Americans and Mr. Bhinde as well. Roopmala, one of their own kith and kin, had suddenly become a stranger to them.

I moved back to the Americans, who, having tried to revive their mother in vain, put her back in the wagon. They had tried to feed her and succeeded in making her swallow drops of milk, but she continued to lie as if she was lifeless. In another hour, they were off, driving away with the translator. I was left there. But, before the elder brother got into his seat, he told

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me, "My friend, you have witnessed a great tragedy. I would beseech you not to put this in a newspaper. It is not a newspaper story. It involves two worlds, two lives, two loves. Please do not interfere and make it worse. We do not know if there is anything more left, any more tragedy to come, any more grief. Bear with us. Forget this story".

I went back to my newspaper office. My Editor asked me whether I had the story. I told him that it fizzled out. There was no story that I could write because my friend Eddy—I hope I can call him that—told me it was not a newpaper story. But I have decided to put it down for the benefit of Mr. Bhinde. Why shouldn't he know? After all, in a sense, it was he who had started it.

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ORDAINED TO LIVE

Dear dada,

You are not likely to know who I am, but that is unimportant. The important point is why I address this letter to you. This will become clear by the time you finish reading it. Perhaps, this may cause a shudder in your heart over what might have happened.

I may begin by pointing out that, even though you do not know me, I know you very well. Indeed, you are not a stranger to me at all. From your early boyhood, until now when you are a respected "elder statesman" of this township, I am familiar with the course of your story.

This is because my friend Kukri, my guide, philosopher, my mentor and comrade, closer to me than a brother, often used to speak about you. This was curious because you were his enemy, the arch-enemy as we all know, to our party. In this little town, you represent everything we are committed to destroy.

Let me be more explicit. To the revolutionary party, to which I belong and of which my friend Kukri was a top leader, you have not only been the symbol but the muscle and teeth of the vested interests. You are the bulwark which protects the local capitalist society and organisation. Kukri was sent here by our G.H.Q. as a local man to build a bridgehead for our party in this growing industrial area. For nearly three years, we were active here in our own way, which means that you were not aware of our existence.

Kukri made it clear to our Committee that you were in command here not only over the capitalist but labour and trade union interests. You were something of a business tycoon and trade unionist rolled

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into one. This made our job all the more difficult and delicate, because any open combat with you would alienate rank and file workers which we did not want to do. I am the junior-most of the diehard members of our party who constitute our local committee with Kukri as our chief. We call him Kukri, but you know him only by his official name.

Our frantic efforts to create a dent in the workers' camp here did not meet with any success. We tried every weapon in our armoury beginning with trained infiltrators, but these failed. Not that workers in your giant factory were satisfied that they they had all they wanted. But they swore their loyalty to you. We also tried in other establishments, but came to the conclusion that, so long as you were there, as proprietor as well as the patron-saint of the trade unions, we had to write off this township from the area of our operations, which we just could not afford to do because we wanted to spread our arms into certain more sensitive political nerve-centres of which this township was a vital spring-board.

Word came from our High Command that there was no alternative in the circumstances to your being removed from the scene. When the matter came up before our Committee, we went into it in detail and agreed that we could make a big headway if we could get rid of you. There was no second to you in your leadership ranks and, once you were out, we could surge in effectively. It was accordingly decided that you should be removed.

The decision, let me say, was unanimous, though some of us felt Kukri had grown up in this town and knew you and might not, therefore, vote for any drastic action. So, when the question came about who

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among us had to undertake the operation, it was suggested that Kukri should be left out. I have never seen him in a more angry mood when the discussion turned this way. Kukri asked straightaway whether they suspected his loyalty to the party and whether all his golden record of nearly three decades had been nullified by his so-called acquaintance with their arch-enemy. "You people have given me the nickname 'Kukri' because I have always held it as a symbol of the people's weapon for the cause of the revolution". Now that the point had been raised, he said, none but he should be entrusted with the job of disposing you off and it should be left to him entirely.

It was a job indeed for us, younger men, to appease him, and finally, force him to pass on the task to one of us. But he declared that he would be the master of operations and see the job through. This was ultimately agreed upon and Kukri was left to choose the time, manner and place to execute the sentence—on you, Dada! How could you know how near you were to death at that time? That is why I said earlier in this letter that you would shudder when you read this.

Kukri and I had a common lodge with one room and a kitchen in the upper story of a small house in a crowded street, mainly made up of small shops where no one had any time for anyone else. I was his Man Friday, many years younger to him. He had several books, mostly party literature, and correspondence with his friends in the country and abroad. We were known locally as journalists who were trying to make a living and were generally left alone in our attic room with an attached alcove which passed for our kitchen where all we did was to make tea several times a day in our gas stove. Kukri used to show his age—after all, he

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was in his late fifties—and appeared weary in the evenings despite conscious efforts to hide it with his gusto and sporting gestures.

Evenings especially, he would sit in his canvas chair, with me squatting on the ground, and be garruluous and it was on such occasions he used to talk about his early years in this town where his father had been a handyman to the rich folk making some money through odd jobs he did for them. You were both, he would tell me, as under-tenners, going to the same school. The most interesting point I used to note about his references to you was that, while he was generally cynical about everyone and everything, he had always a kind word for you. He would say that, in those years, he had not known anything like affection or fellow-feeling from anyone except you. You were a rich man's son and was way up the social ladder, but Kukri being noted as a bright and sparkling lad, he won your regard and you would not only befriend him but show genuine affection despite the social gap, even ignoring your classy high-brow friends. You had come to his house many a time and you had forced him to go to your place and introduced him to your parents, though he was ill-dressed and noticeably a poor boy. You had once in fact forced him to stay at your house and had persuaded your lofty parents to see his bright future rather than his then poverty-stricken background.

That chapter of Kukri's life was brief, however, for his father could not educate him and he sent him to Calcutta to find a job and study further if he could or cared. Kukri was practically lost to genteel society when his father died soon after and his mother moved to her village where she found some shelter. It was

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then Kukri came under the influence of M. N. Roy and joined the first band of the young hopefuls of our Revolutionary Party. He evolved in course of time and, scraping through many bloody incidents, came to be a party veteran.

The question of implementing our decision regarding you was hanging fire. One day Kukri came to our familiar verandah seat with a pink wedding invitation card and passed it on to me with a smile. Then he fell into a reverie and I did not interrupt him.

"This is the invitation for his daughter's marriage" he said, adding: "Why can't we make our project spectacular and draw suspicion away from us?"

I stared at him unable to understand what he had in mind. He remained silent for a time and then continued:

"I shall attend this wedding," he said, "and I feel that we should bring in our Executive so that he can operate at a suitable moment and disappear".

I told him that it was up to him to manage and he had to be his own guide. He looked at me and smiled enigmatically. "Yes, you are right."

Later, Kukri put the idea to our comrades and they said, as I had done, that he had taken it upon himself to complete the project and he had his lieutenant, picked and chosen, who, Kukri should know, could be relied upon not to flinch under any circumstances.

On the appointed day, Kukri had a long talk with this young fire-brand who, by the look of him, nobody could suspect what a bloody devil he could be. The plan was that, at a suitable opportunity when you got away from the crowd for something, you should be followed and shot. Crowds would gather thereafter

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and the assailant should mix with them and escape. The idea was a jarring one, but that, Kukri said, was what he precisely wanted.

Kukri accordingly briefed the youth to watch for his direction so that he could proceed to act sharply. Kukri dressed with special care that morning with his silk achchkan and cap. A tall figure, he could be a picture of grace and dignity. The other man was dressed simply in a decent pyjama and Kurta covering himself with a thick dark shawl to hide the lethal weapon he carried.

Kukri was received enthusiastically by you, although both of you knew you had mutually hostile political loyalties. He actually embraced you, which you warmly reciprocated. I was with him and, also, the other young chap whom Kukri introduced as his friend whom he had brought along. You welcomed us all charmingly and we were soon mixing freely with the huge crowd in the shamiana.

Our young friend, who, as arranged previously, sat away from us and near the side entrance which led to the off-side of the bunglow. The wedding ceremony had not started and Kukri, as he had explained earlier, was to make it appear as some kind of a personal vendetta by a thwarted young man who had wanted to marry your good-looking and wealthy daughter.

It was not long after that we saw you break away from a group and cross the entrance to the rear side of the house. Kukri immediately gave a gentle nod to our watchman and he followed. I was expecting that, in a few seconds, we would hear the shot and bedlam would break out. I was getting ready to rush, but found Kukri calm and he even smiled at me. Then, all at once, I found that you were standing behind us

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shaking hands with some guests and saluting with folded hands some distinguished women guests. I looked at Kukri somewhat stupefied, because he had given the signal earlier for our young friend to follow the man who was going out and do his job.

A few moments later, we saw the man who had gone out, re-enter the pandal, followed by our friend. I stared at Kukri and he smiled at me again. Thereafter, the wedding ceremonial began and, being the bride's father, you were right in the midst of the crowd all the time. The rush and turmoil was such that all of us got separated. Kukri and I silently returned to our abode. Both of us were too full of our thoughts to say anything. Finally, I said, it seemed we had committed a bloomer and he replied throwing up his hands: "That is all in the game. We must be grateful it has not been worse."

That night, we met for the expected post-mortem meeting. Kukri seemed to be full of rage and began by saying that this was the reason why he had at first said that he should handle the job himself without anyone to mislead or be misled. Kukri said that what happened was that, from his distance, he had made a mistake about the person who had walked out of the pandal. He was dressed exactly like you and had an almost exact profile. Kukri argued that the young man at his post should have known better and given him a hint that he was wrong there and then. Apparently, he made the same mistake and followed him to discover immediately after when the other man turned for something, that he had come after the wrong man. The opportunity had slipped away and he blamed himself and the whole committee for the lapse, stressing

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the point that he should have been allowed to do the job himself.

The frustrated young man, who had been equally angry and restless during this time, was watching Kukri with eyes which looked at Kukri as if dumbfounded. After his harangue, Kukri glared at him. It was only for a moment. Then everything happened in a flash.

"Yes, now I know" the young man broke into a scream. "I thought so. It was you, you who did it. I have seen it in your eyes. I cannot make a mistake. You knew it all the time. By God, I see it in your eyes. You knew he was the wrong man and you knew that I would discover my mistake in time and nothing would happen. You, you, you, old jackal, you ruined me and betrayed..."

He was panting with rage and trembling and roared: "My lord, you will pay for it."

Before we could shake ourselves up, he had suddenly turned, snatched the little gun which had been on the table and rapidly fired three shots at point-blank range. Kukri lifted his hands as if to stop him and fell backwards. The others grabbed the young man and took the gun away from him which was still emitting fumes.

I jumped up to Kukri, who was now lying on his back partly supported by a chair, and was losing consciousness. He seemed to be trying to say something to me and managed his enigmatic smile again. In a voiceless whisper, I heard him say: "Bless him, he won't know, no, he, he won't. Bless him". I put my hand on his forehead which was all wet with sweat. He started bleeding profusely. He had been hit once in the shoulder and then down in the stomach.

The others rushed up and held him, trying to

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make him talk. But no more words came from Kukri. His eyes closed after one stare all round. And that was the end.

No one had heard what passed between us and I felt that what he said was only meant for me and I kept my peace. Our preoccupation was over what next? We opened a window—this we had not done earlier as Kukri had burst out as soon as we all had entered the room. We had found this shelter, which was some kind of a hut near a ruined temple which nobody frequented and was always desolate in the night. We caught hold of the other fellow and calmed him though he was still furious and uncontrollable. The gun was taken away from him. Nothing could be done, however, as the crime, ultimately if discovered, would throw all of us to the wolves.

We covered up Kukri's body and tried to stop the blood by heaps of old clothes. Later, we drove in a country cart with fodder and removed his body and threw it away before dawn of the next day into a little-used lane after planting some evidence that it had been an act of revenge from fellow revolutionaries. The body was discovered before long, but there had been no evidence of where the crime had been committed.

There was no one to claim the body too, we learnt later. Both of us, who had come with him to your place, were the first to make off and we were in Calcutta before daylight. You identified Kukri, we were told, with great grief and, as a prominent citizen, arranged for the funeral after the inevitable police exercises. The crime has remained unsolved, as we know in our party that it would be once we get rid of a renegade.

Yes, Kukri was a renegade, but you should know better, Dada, for, later, thinking over all that had

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happened, I knew Kukri had planned his game well to save you and played it expertly and executed it magnificently as only he could, making in the process his supreme sacrifice to save the old friend of his boyhood, whom you know now as you.

I decided to let you know the whole story because I knew Kukri's last thought was of you. Besides, no one including you would know otherwise what happened and how Kukri died. Kukri wanted you to live. Bloody revolutionary as he was, with hands stained like hell with blood, a friend was a friend to him. Live, therefore, Dada, live. Kukri has ordained it.

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GONE WITH THE CROWD

It was all noise, crowd and dust. The heat was unbearable. The whole street was filled with a hundred vehicles. An over-crowded team-car, wending its way through this maze, added to the confusion. Street hawkers shouting sing-song slogans gave the finishing touch to this pandemonium.

This was the background to little Sarala's dance show. She occupied a corner of the street where it was somewhat wide and an only half-dead tree gave some semblance of a shade.

An aged man with a tabla and a little boy with a gong constituted her troupe. She sang and danced to their accompaniment. This was her little world. She loved to dance. Her dance was governed by no rules and she followed no codes. Her grandpa used to teach her songs and she formed her own signs and steps. Her little brother would beat the time. There would always be a ring of people and sometimes when the music notes swelled and blended with her movements in one harmony, the crowd would join with her clapping their hands. Then would Sarala glow in joy, spread her hands into the air and close her eyes. Round and round she would swing, mad in joy.

Little Sarala was barely twelve years old. Hers was a strange nomadic life. Each day they moved from place to place. Wherever there was a crowd, her grandpa would call her to sing and they would begin. Sometimes they would go to other shows of the kind. Her grandpa would buy her sweets once in a way when Sarala gets quite a lot of coins from the people.

This afternoon Sarala was feeling the heat oppressive. She was tired. Her fair face was red and little

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pearls of perspiration collected on her forehead. She had been singing and dancing for some time and now she edged on towards her grandpa and whispered to him: "Let us go somewhere grandpa. I want to sit."

"Very well, my child" the old man said. "Take the money the people give you and we'll go."

Sarala went round with her right hand stretched. A few people dropped some coins. She was about to turn round when a loud manly voice called to her.

"Hello girl, come on, give us another dance for my children here. I shall give you something special."

Sarala saw a well-dressed, distinguished gentleman, Three young girls stood near him, the eldest of them about three or four years younger to Sarala. There was the gentleman's wife standing near him. Sarala thought the gentleman nice and rich, but she did not want to dance any more. She was tired.

"I am tired, Sir", she said. "Why didn't you come before like them all?"

"Hey child" called out her grand-father from behind. "Don't say that. See, the gentleman wants to show your dance to the children. Do sing, darling, just a little".

"Yes, do sing please, won't you?" asked the eldest of the girls.

Sarala looked at them with a tinge of anger and pain, calling her to dance just when her legs ached so.

Sarala looked at the young girls, the nice clothes they wore and their father and mother. Yes, she would show them how she could dance and how well she could sing.

So she began. Although her steps were faltering, summoning all her energy, she sang and danced. It was not her best performance. When one is self-con-

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scious and wants to show off, one always fails. Poor Sarala threw all her spirit in, but she felt it was all going wrong. She could not hold out long. When she finished one song, she abruptly stopped. She paused for a moment and went near the little girls.

"Can you dance?" she asked the eldest.

"No, we don't dance. Only poor girls in the street do," she replied.

"I am not poor. All these pice are mine, see" Sarala rejoined.

"But you are poor. You have no clothes like ours. You don't go to school."

Sarala looked at them sharply. Yes, they wore fine silk dresses and jewels. She had an old cotton gown in a kind of glaring red, partly stitched up on the shoulder. As the thought crossed her mind, she felt it with her hand. Some kind gentleman had thrown it to her at a fair at Agra. She turned back for an instant at her grandfather and replied:

"Yes," he replied with a smile. "Funny, isn't it ?"

Her weariness overcame her once again. She became indifferent what dress who wore. The people were gradually dispersing.

The lady whispered to her husband: "See, she resembles our Sita a bit, doesn't she?"

"Yes, he replied with a smile." "Funny, isn't it?"

"What is your name, dear?" she asked of the little girl.

"Sarala" she replied.

"Sarala? SA-RA-LA?" exclaimed the gentleman. He stared at the little girl.

"Yes, Sarala" repeated the girl. "You know it was my mother's name and when she died, I asked grandpa to call me Sarala and so I became Sarala".

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The gentleman stood staring at Sarala and was silent.

The old man walked up to them and said: "Yes, Sarala, my child, died leaving this little precious to me. She wants to be like her mother and says I must call her Sarala".

"Where is Sarala's father?" interposed the gentleman in a thick voice.

Little Sarala watched him and thought he was a good and kind man to speak to grandpa.

"Well, you know, my daughter was a circus girl", the old man said. "She was a sweet simple thing. Her husband was a gentleman though I have never seen him. Sarala would always say she would one day be a lady. But she moved off with the circus and little Sarala was born. Then Sarala went back to Bombay to see her husband, but she did not see him again. She then married Kurshid in the Circus and this little boy was born. She died, poor dear, and I don't know where Kurshid is."

"What happened to the gentleman?" asked the lady.

"I don't know, madam. I have never seen him," the old man replied.

"Very sad, isn't it dear? asked the wife.

"Yes, yes," he nodded. Sarala watched without taking her eyes off the gentleman for a second. So big and tall, yet kind, she thought, the way he looked at her.

He pulled out his purse and took out a rupee note and gave it to Sarala. He said nothing. He did not even look at her as he gave it.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, Sir." cried out Sarala, overflowing in her gratitude. She had never

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seen a rupee before. "He has given me a rupee, grandpa, see," she shouted to the old man. "O my mother," she added. That was a pet mannerism.

More crowd flowed in. The gentleman silently led his wife and children away. Sarala followed them with her eyes. He was so kind, but he said not a word and he never even looked back.

Jagdish walked on. The girls wanted to buy all kinds of knick-knacks. It was always so on a shopping day. And three hours passed in the wandering. It looked as if Sarala was forgotton.

It was dusk when Jagdish got into a tonga to go home.

"She was a strange girl, that Sarala" suddenly remarked his wife.

"Yes, very strange" he said.

"He was a wicked man" she continued. "I am sure he would not have married that poor girl. He must have deceived her."

Jagadish took out his pocket handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "Yes, he was a wicked man" he said.

"What a poor child! She was so wildly happy when you gave her a rupee. So grateful for so little."

Jagdish said nothing. He turned away from his wife. His face was red. He was never so unlike himself. He was generally genial and talkative. As soon as he reached home, he shut himself up in his room. She went to him and found him feverish. Suddenly he spoke to her, all in one breath. It was a long story of suppressed pain and he told it with a grim voice. After an outburst lasting several minutes, he cried out:

"I am wicked, wicked" and covered his face.

"Did you really love her? Why didn't you marry

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her ?" asked his wife. Her anger melted into pity when she saw the suffering of this poor man.

"I loved her madly. I wanted to marry her. After finishing my examination, I went up to Poona but father forced me to stay with him for a time. I wrote to her but received no reply. She probably didn't know how to write. It was two months before I came to Bombay again. Then she was gone. I ran about all over the place. Some said she had gone away. But I never knew there was a child. She was just seventeen."

"May God forgive you," she said. She was not angry. She was pitying her weeping husband. She remained silent for several minutes. He sat like a man turned to stone.

"It is our Sarala from now," she said. "Please go and bring her."

Jagadish looked at her for an instant and sprang up and embraced her. Perhaps, he might yet redeem himself. In two minutes, they were racing back to the city in a fast tonga.

The crowd was moving on. The lights had come but the same noise, crowd and dust was there. Jagadish went up to the tree corner. There were some people hanging around. Jagadish looked anxiously. It was a sweetmeat seller.

"She is gone?" asked his wife. Jagadish was pale. His face was burning. He said nothing.

"She is gone," his wife mumbled. He said nothing. He gently breathed "Sarala, Sarala."

Jagadish combed the city for weeks afterwards. But Sarala and her troupe were nowhere to be seen.

Thirty miles away from the city was a small village and its annual fair attracted large crowds. There were

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many small side-shows and much fun. In one corner, a little girl was singing and dancing. An old man beat a tabla for her and a little boy sounded a gong for time. There was a ring of people around them and they threw small coins to the girl.

Two days later, the fair ended. The crowd and the shows all moved away. So did the little girl with her troupe. There was some festival in a small town a few miles beyond.

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AT THE ZERO HOUR

"The charges have been read out to you. Do you plead guilty or not guilty".

"Guilty, my Lord."

"There are many charges".

"I plead guilty to all of them, my Lord".

"Has the Prosecution Counsel anything to say? The accused pleads guilty".

"If the Defence Counsel agrees, we would request the Court to close the case for judgement".

"Without the cooperation of the accused, as Defence Counsel, I have to submit there is nothing I can do. The accused has declined to give any cooperation".

"If the Court please, my Lord, I have no Defence Counsel. The Prosecution Counsel can confirm that I have extended the fullest cooperation to them. In fact, their case is my case and they have the facts confirmed by me, I believe, as stated in the charges".

"This is extraordinary. In all my years as presiding Judge of this Court, I have not come across a case of this kind. The accused is a well-known person who has enjoyed a great measure of prominence and influence. The Court would like to assure itself that the statement of the accused has not been secured under coercion. Would the Prosecution give such an assurance, confirmed by the accused and the Defence?"

"If the Court please, my Lord, I am ready to place before the Court fully and faithfully the circumstances under which my plea of guilty was made and, earlier, I had supplied the Prosecution with the necessary facts".

"May I submit, my Lord, that any sentence given to me will not be more severe than what I have given or wish to give myself. The Court may decide on the

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character of this sentence after hearing how these crimes were committed and how I was their author".

"The charges against me cover the whole range of anti-social crimes afflicting current day life in our country—bribery, breach of trust, hoarding, profiteering, misuse of licences, misappropriation of public funds, smuggling and violation of foreign exchange regulations and adulteration of food stuff which could lead to loss of life. I cannot speak for the others involved in this case along with me, but I do wish to speak for myself and accept full responsibility for my part in these crimes.

"I do not know if my words will be regarded as words of atonement. I mean them, however, to be words of warning for brothers and sisters and sons and daughters who are, even now, set on the course of temptation. I solicit some patience, my Lord. This is my story and I shall tell it without tears. My tears are dry.

"I thank my God, my father is no more. He is not here to see or listen to me. He was a simple villager who never allowed his wife and children to starve nor did he know all the riches and the public adulation I have had, today I would say, the misfortune to enjoy.

"I was that simple, noble villager's son. He had a pan* shop on the small veranda of our little hut. And, as I grew up and wanted to shift to the premises of my cousin who had left his shop to move out to a big city, my father smiled and said: "You are ambitious. It is good, but do not allow it to get mastery over your sense of values. Remember, the first requisite of integrity is contentment".

* Betel leaves.

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"I did move to my cousin's shop, a small one too in its own way, but in independent premises in the bazaar of that little village. With my father's blessings, I added a few odd things to our stock like some eats, sherbat and tender coconuts. My father would come for a few hours each day and take his seat at the pan corner, while I served other customers—until, one day, Chandan came from the city and our lives began to change.

"My father was a little distrustful of him. I was only 19 at the time and my father said that I should be careful of these city lads. But Chandan attracted me. He had a bright face and, although he was the son of a man who was some kind of land-broker in our village and had a somewhat unsavoury reputation, Chandan professed himself to be on his own and said he would neither get any property from his father nor would he ever stand in need of any. 'I have seen a bit of life in Delhi', he said, 'and feel I should serve the people, for which I do not need money but only the will to serve and sacrifice'.

"Chandan would tell me tales of the cities, of poor people who had made good. His own uncle, with whom he had lived, had built up a drug store and the local Corporation Councillor was one of his patrons who had helped him to get a licence for imported liquor. His uncle's limitation was his queer notion that he would not borrow money and his refusal to give credit. He had, therefore, to be content with a small turn-over and small profit. His patron, the city father, thought poorly of him, but his uncle was not tempted and kept his own counsel and his principles.

"I was filled with admiration for Chandan's ideas. As owing to poor health my father's presence in the

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shop became occasional until it finally ended, Chandan was becoming a part of the shop. He ate the odd little things in the shop and drank the sherbat and talked endlessly about city life. Chandan's big day came when he encountered a political leader from our district town and he agreed to work for him for his election. He was a busy bird from then on and he brought a number of city folk to our shop and urged me to buy some chairs and a bench or two and have a small pandal in front of the shop, at least temporarily. My father was against this, arguing why any expense should be incurred on what he called "travellers" who came and went. But I was thrilled by the superior crowd and the necessary money was found.

"Another year had not passed before Chandan himself was a candidate for the Municipal Corporation at the district headquarters. He was a bachelor though he was seven years older to me and was at the time, I believe, nearly 30 years of age. Chandan said I would have to help him with funds as he would not ask his father, holding that he wanted to repay these "advances" and his father would never accept this. But he told me that he would find the way himself and I would not have to worry about it. For the first time, on Chandan's advice, I kept something from my father and got an advance on my own credit from the small banker of our little town on condition that he would not divulge this fact to any one, my father in particular. The interest he charged was good enough for him to keep his silence.

"Chandan won the election and to do him credit, the first thing he did was to arrange for the primary school in our village to be elevated to a middle school

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with an extension to the building. He got the Municipality, under whose jurisdiction our village fell, to sanction the requisite funds and Chandan himself found the building contractor. The contractor it was who returned the money Chandan had borrowed from me with all the interest and the banker was as happy as I was.

"We were both now set, it seemed, on a new and exciting road to fame and success. Chandan continued to be very friendly to me and he made me a party to all his plans and bargains. He was now a busy man with his Council work in the town but, once in the village in our get-togethers, the question before us was, what next? He was determined to do his best for his village which had given him birth. His father was something of a problem. With his mother's death, Chandan's link with his father was slender, especially after his father married again. But now that he was somebody, his father seemed to take advantage of it, though he would not approach his son directly. Chandan had accepted it as a problem he had to live with as best as he could.

"Our village was a link between two district towns and Chandan's idea was to get a trunk road pass through both the towns which would naturally, without any special effort, put our village on the map of progress. He worked frantically and suggested that I should take a fairly spacious house in the municipal town so that we could do some social entertaining. Money was the least part of it, according to Chandan. It seemed so for a fact since Chandan had established extensive contacts with local party traders, contractors and the like and he put me in touch with them as something like his agent to deal with money matters. We could

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raise some money without much big effort and, in a few weeks, I had a small bungalow, furnished under Chandan's supervision. Chandan would not stay there since he told me, as a politician, he must live on his own in a modest place, but he would use the bungalow and avail of my hospitality, incidentally helping our combined cause, to develop his political stature.

"I was somewhat worried over these commitments, over which it appeared I had not much control. From a small business, which I knew to its last detail, I seemed to be now launched on totally unfamiliar terrain. My father was greatly agitated by my activities and protested that our local shop was being neglected and ruined. I was barely twenty-five at this time. I merely told my father that there were no debts involved and the money for the town house came from sources which gave grants and not loans. My father was extremely uncomfortable and told my young brother, who was looking after the old shop with me, not to get involved in what he called these devious transactions.

"Our big break came when the link road was sanctioned. There was already a kuchcha* road. Chandan said that now was the time to strike and he got me a petrol fuelling station from one of the foreign companies. They would look after everything, he said. My only job would be to collect the cash and take my cut. Indeed, so it was. In three month's time, our village seemed to have at one point of its road to the District headquarters, a sleek modern petrol pumping station with an office room, furniture and what not, with white, blue and red splashed all over with a huge advertising board. To tell the truth, I was terrified at all this show and pomp and Chandan himself as Municipal

* Rough.

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Councillor, opened the station with a white Company Manager in attendance and Chandan's father, now rather humbled, sat among the audience. With jeeps, trucks and motor cycles of those engaged in the road-building work, my first day's collections came to an astronomical figure in our village terms. I told Chandan I would be choked unless I had someone to help me with the accounts which the white foreign bosses wanted to be maintained in a series of forms of which I could make out nothing. Chandan told me that all that would be looked after and the big white man patted me on the back and said that the Councillor had spoken well of me and everything would be all right. I think I became a criminal from that day, for this is what followed.

"I reached home that night, elated and excited, with the sense of a new power like some man who had laid hands on a treasure. In Chandan's company, with his proddings and help, I had acquired a few silk dresses and formal apparel. The house was empty but for our aged servant who said that all had gone to the annual village *Mela and added that father had left word that I might join them as it might run to a late hour. I told him I was tired and was certainly not in a mood for a rustic show, my urban spirits having been fired by the morning ceremony and all that company. The old man said that, in that case, he would like to go if I did not mind. I told him not to worry and I would just lie down and take rest.

"There was the distant noise of the jingle of bells and music and echoes of dancing which, because of my familiarity with the scene, filled my head with all kinds of nostalgic thoughts. A little while later, a

* Jamboree.

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shadow appeared and I found it was Savithri, my cousin, cousin more by courtesy than relationship as we were related only in a very remote way. She had come in earlier, she told me, and had dropped her woollen shawl behind and as it was getting slightly cold she had come to collect it. She asked me why I was not coming for the Mela and chose to remain at home. I told her about the day's happenings and I was all excited. She told me that it seemed that, at this rate, I would be leaving the village before long. I told her I would never forget my home and village and my people. She became somewhat shy and I remembered how my father had once mentioned that it was his idea that I should marry Savithri as they were very poor and the family would be helped if they got linked with ours. That was the way my father's mind worked, influenced by love for relatives, especially poor relatives.

"There she was, just seventeen, extremely pretty in a rural way, buxom and beaming. I asked whether she knew I was going to marry her and that we were going to make something of ourselves as husband and wife. Savithri blushed and, to this day, criminal that I am, I do not know what happened to me. We were soon in each other's arms and Savithri ceased to be a virgin.

"She rushed away and I was all in a sweat, all my excitement replaced by a very different and depressing sentiment. Not a word was said and the world seemed to be the same as ever and no one saw any difference though I moved about with a load on my mind. Curiously, with the new horizon for the business, my father opened the subject of my marriage a few days later suggesting that I should marry Savithri

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as he had earlier suggested. When the news reached Chandan, he would not hear of it. He said that Savithri would be a millstone round my neck in the big modern world opening for me. He disclosed that he had a girl in mind, actually a sister of the girl he himself was going to marry, the daughter of a political leader, who was not rich but was many rungs above us in the social ladder.

"I kept my peace for the moment, but told my father that night in confidence that Chandan was pressing me for a high-brow marriage and, because of our business connections, it would be difficult for me to resist the pressure. I told him that, so far as I was concerned, I would abide by his wishes and, in fact, felt already committed to obey him regarding Savithri. That was the way I put it and I saw that my father was very happy with me after a long while. I requested him to go about it quickly and arrange the wedding at the earliest date possible. My father was in full agreement over my fears about Chandan's pressure and, within three days, Savithri and I were married. Our first night was spent in tears. Savithri was overwhelmed. She told me that she had lived in hell out of fear that, with all my big business prospects, I would not be able to marry her and then what would happen to her? I told her that she should have thought better of me and we were happy, as God meant it, and I felt that, of all the great favours God had in store for me, Savithri would be the greatest and we would share our love and life together. I wish God had granted my wish.

"My father had chosen a time when Chandan was away and the village, which always kept abreast of each other's affairs, was for the first time taken by

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surprise. They had heard an odd whisper or two that my father had a plan to get me married to Savithri, but they discounted it on account of the social disparity arising from her family's poor circumstances and our rapidly rising prosperity. Chandan had been shocked and told me that I had made a bad job of it and would now have to carry with me an unpleasant and irksome load. But I felt that that was the finest thing I had done and, with my Savithri's blooming face in my mind, I told him that Savithri was God's gift to me and, if I stuck to her, God would never desert me. I did not know that what I thought then was more true than I imagined."

"I tried to get Savithri to my town house, but she simply refused saying that my work was not such that I had to stay in the town. She was a wonderful girl and I could not believe at first that, in this rustic background, she could be so wise and forthright. After our marriage, with happiness and prosperity, she became unimaginably beautiful and there was nothing to mar our big horizon of happiness. My father died at this time, but Savithri kept the sun shining in my heart".

"Chandan alone was the sceptic. The petrol station had proved to be a gold mine and, before another year had passed, I had a motor car of my own and was flitting between the town and my village which was still my home. Savithri would occasionally join me in our trips to the town, but would insist on returning home for the night. Moreover, she was going to have her first baby and she wanted to be with the village elders. She was against my joining hands with Chandan in politics, which, she said, would affect my business. But Chandan kept asking me, where would my business be without his politics ?"

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"That was the way it was. With money coming in like mad as it seemed to me, Chandan told me that I should now embark on a transport service and acquire one or two buses. Licence was needed to run public transport but Chandan procured this for me. The bank was liberal with advances and, before long, I had a fleet of six buses running with a whole lot of staff, with three additional petrol stations under my control. Chandan too, by this time, was a big-time political leader. He became a very influential figure and was in great demand to open schools, colleges and hospitals and business premises. We were as close as ever, for Chandan had no income of his own and I was his treasury, so to say.

"My son was four years old and I was 33 when I bought my first house in Delhi. Chandan told me that this would be a flea-bite for me now and it would greatly help our work for my fame and my business and his politics. Savithri came only once to our Delhi house. She said she was frightened at all the high and mighty talk that now surrounded me and Chandan and our society was full of rich and important men. She told me that I was not all that educated to undertake such large-scale activities. I replied to her with the words Chandan had addressed to me in reply to precisely the same question I had put to him. "Money talks, my girl" I said, "money talks. I can get work done by educated people on good salaries. Do not worry, my dear. So long as you are with me, I shall be fine".

"That was always what I used to tell her. But she was uneasy. On Chandan's advice, I decided to go in for a paper factory, not far from our village. This was going to cost some lakhs. But Chandan gave

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me confidence. He was now a candidate for Parliament and was in need of money on a large scale. The bank loans were sanctioned and part of the money I secured I had to give Chandan. He brought me into touch with other knowledgeable men and I collected a team of experts, engineers and others. Some of the documents prepared to secure bank loans, I realised, were false and were faked, but I was too deeply involved in the project to withdraw now. I signed and signed everything placed before me. Money was rolling in amounts undreamt of by me and I somehow felt that my father would not have approved of all this. My young brother, who had, ironically, married a town girl, refused to move out of the village. He naturally shared my prosperity in some ways, but he stuck to the village and our little business, the old pan shop, was almost a forgotten memory. My brother now ran a big departmental store, the biggest one in the district.

"Weeks on end, I had to stay in Delhi. Chandan got elected and he got his own residence from the Government. We had everything to do with each other, as he had tied me up completely in all kinds of links. The paper factory had now a second unit in one of the colonies adjoining the State capital. We were preparing for a cement factory. I was turning 40. Savithri had a girl now and she insisted that the city air would not suit the child. My humble thousands had grown into many, many lakhs. There was no place I could go to without an army of sychophants. Some enterprising folk used to go to Savithri in the village to get at me through her, but she would drive them away mercilessly."

"I began to feel lonely and desolate in all this bustle and splendour. God knows what all documents

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I had signed. I had advisers and officers and they told me various details, some of which stuck to me but much of it I could not absorb. At the same time, I was too ashamed to confess ignorance about them. Chandan was in and out of my house. He had not married, but I knew he had women going to him. I upbraided him as a friend and brother, but he told me that marriage would ruin him but he might eventually decide to marry. And he did, to my surprise, at 48. He told me he was marrying the step-daughter of a Minister and that it was going to be a "political marriage".

"To make a long story short, it was not long after that I too fell into bad company. Money can make a mockery of morals. Chandan had got me to drink whisky as the panacea for physical and mental exhaustion and forgetting Savithri soon proved to be not so difficult after all. At 35, she still remained the most beautiful woman I knew and my son was a very sweet fellow, my little daughter a picture of beauty. But, in Delhi, I lost control over myself.

"My business activities made it inevitable soon that I should go abroad and I insisted on Savithri accompanying me but she refused. The result was, in London and New York, one of the society women I had known in Delhi was as much at a loose end as I was and we made a husband and wife team for hotel purposes. That was that. I had enormous secret foreign exchange accumulations, all arranged by my officers under Chandan's guidance and money was as easy to get abroad as at home.

"My story is briefly told thereafter. At 51 today, I have 17 big and small factories. A newspaper is under my financial control but which serves Chandan

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and whose journalists take instructions from him. There are enormous foreign exchange reserves, which I have since disclosed to the authorities. There have been signatures to documents which are false to secure advances from banks for my huge industrial commitments. My young son too is involved in some of them. I confess this with great pain, though, poor boy, he would never sign a document without getting my approval and I got the approval of Chandan and my technical advisers."

"Among my offences, I regard as the worst, the adulteration of certain drugs in two of my factories which have been detected. I pleaded guilty to this charge as well because the trade union leaders in the factory had warned me about the goings-on. When I consulted Chandan, he said that the union people were against the factory manager who was related to a very dear and influential friend of his. It was best, he said, to keep mum over the matter, which it was easy for me to do, though my mind was in great suffering. Some months later, however, my manager resigned and a few subordinate staff were arrested and I was confronted with some documents I had signed as usual.

"Till this trouble came, I must say, Chandan and I have been partners, me with the money and he with his politics mutually sustaining our respective interests. Our business ramifications—Chandan had no legal status in them anywhere—run into crores. I do not know what documents the police have taken from my residence and offices, but they all appear without doubt to bear my signatures. Since my arrest and detention, I have not seen anyone except my lawyers who are allowed funds by my companies and have actually been engaged by my officers for me, though I have refused to have

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anything to do with them. Much of my cash is in Chandan's safe-keeping. My son has, on my instructions, given all the cash in hand to the authorities with the request that what is left after the tax deductions may be paid to the lawyers. There are no personal creditors as no money has been borrowed for any personal needs. The women and others, who have been dependent on me, have also been paid from the companies on my lawyer's advice in consultation with Chandan.

Savithri, my wife, and my daughter, continue to live in the village and have refused to draw any money from me and depend on my brother's fairly prosperous shop in our little town. But she has sent me one communication to say that I am always, at any time and under any condition, free to go to her as the man who loved and married her.

"That is my story, my Lord. The crimes and offences have been so many. I have neither the energy, capacity nor the will to go through them. The Prosecutor has shown me various papers and, since I feel more guilty in my own eyes than perhaps in the eyes of the law, I decided not to have any counsel for my defence. I have confirmed that no transaction, which may be borne out by these papers have taken place without my knowledge and I plead guilty to all the charges. I await the Court's judgement".

"Would the Public Prosecutor now say whether the principal collaborator, apparently an influential person, is available for testimony. This might help the Court in coming to its own conclusions on the precise extent of the guilt and the nature of the sentence called for ?"

"My Lord, I have to submit that the accused extended his cooperation to us, his Prosecutors, on the understanding that he would not be called upon to

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disclose the identity of this friend and collaborator. Also, on paper, the Prosecution has no evidence to establish such an identity. We would, however, make another effort and make a submission to your lordship tomorrow".

The Court adjourned and convened again the next morning. The judge called for the statement from the Prosecutor.

"My Lord, the Prosecution, on a re-examination of the case, find that the evidence reveals certain vital gaps and they have, therefore, no alternative but to withdraw the case against the accused. The cases against other accused persons in the case are also being withdrawn".

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THE HAUNTING HORSE-STEPS

Shree and I were cousins, class-fellows and, more than everything else, very close friends. When he married Leena, the first thing he told her was that she should get her best friend for my wife so that we would make a wonderful foursome.

I had not met them after they moved to their factory bungalow, some 10 miles out from the city, and Leena and Shree had been pressing me to come over for a weekend.

That was how I was there a Saturday evening with my overnight kit packed in a small portmanteau. Leena gave me one of her dazzling smiles as I entered and bade me sit on the long sofa saying Shree would be back from the factory in a few minutes. In the meanwhile, would I have some tea ?

Leena, I felt, was like a lily, clean and fresh and blooming, not one of those over-made-up young women one finds in the more fashionable city colleges, though she was a product of precisely one such college. She was frank and charmingly unsophisticated, indeed very rare qualities for her background.

As Leena walked into the kitchen saying "Let me see what is there for eats," I took my seat on the sofa. It was a neat, cosy drawing room with furniture and curtains, all arranged by Leena, as Shree would say, with her artless-looking art. In a few minutes, she was back to answer the phone which started ringing. She finished in seconds and set about hunting for a book which, she said, she must locate before her meticulous friend came. "She just phones and she is in a fury that I did not return her book that she had lent me. She is one of those vogue women, you know, who read

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books that are talked about at fashionable parties, but I could not get beyond its opening chapter and, now, I do not remember where I threw it."

She was off to an inner room as I sat musing with the plateful of nuts and grapes she had placed on the small side table near me. I lay back on the sofa and suddenly something seemed to alert me.

It was a strange thought. "I have been here before" I said to myself, but the place then was different. It came back all vivid to me. It was a much bigger hall, yes, very much bigger with a huge chandelier hanging from the centre of the ceiling. I was standing and the whole picture was there before me. I saw a young woman, her hair flowing, the beautiful face excited over something. She was wearing a gorgeous silk saree in light pink which lent grace to her form and manner.

"You are the person I was hoping to see," she exclaimed as she hurried towards me. "You have come to see my father ?"

"Yes, Your Highness", I mumbled and waited for her to speak.

"Well, you are going to be disappointed, for he had a late night playing cards with the old gang and has just got up. He is grumpy and, if you want anything from him, I would give you a tip. This is not the time to see him. But, you can please me a bit by doing me a favour and I shall blow the sweet wind to the Raja Saheb for you. Will you do something for me?"

That was the polite way of the Princess to issue a command. I was a palace official and, in any case, I had no choice. I told her I would be honoured and

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she said that Maharajkumar* (she called her consort that way though he was not the heir to the throne which would be hers when the time came) had gone to the hunting lodge in the jungle and had been away four days. This was not unusual, but he would normally keep sending some message or other to her. Would I, therefore, ride out and see that all was well and bring back some tidings from him ?

I set out immediately with two of the men from the royal stable. It was late in the evening when I, tired and buried in dust, rode into the Maharajkumar's jungle lodge. There had been no hunting apparently and the camp officials told me that the Maharajkumar had not mentioned anything about a hunt and had kept close to himself, moving out now and then for a stroll with his guards keeping watch from a distance. He had slept little and spoken to no one except to order his food which he barely touched. He had not also asked for liquor, which he usually consumed in sizeable quantities whenever he was away from the Princess, particularly during his hunting trips.

I waited quietly outside the house until he noticed me when he came out and raised his brow in surprise. "What has brought you here in such haste, my dear old man," he asked me in an affectionate but taunting tone.

I told him that the Maharanee** had been concerned and had sent me for a report.

"You are an old hound and must have heard by now here that something has gone wrong with me. Yes?" he asked smiling.

I bowed my head in confusion and he continued:

* Prince.
** Queen or Princess.

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"There is nothing wrong with me, Peshkarji" he said, adding in an aside—"Yet".

I was taken aback and moved up closer and asked if I could have his confidence as an old servant of the Royal house which my father and, before him, his father had served with devotion.

"I do not think you can do anything," he said leaning on the massive pillar at the entrance. "Only, I have a forboding that, if I return to the palace, something will go wrong".

"Is it not very strange ?", he continued as if speaking to himself. "I do not know what this means. I am just reluctant to go back and I am quite depressed, though the Princess, I know, will be worrying."

I assured him that she was very well and cheerful, being confident that you would not take any risk and would return safely. "But still, you have been away for four days and you have not sent her any message".

"Well, tell me, what message can I send her ? Won't I look foolish if I tell her about my funny fears ? Yet, there they are. How can you help me ? How can anyone help ?"

I enquired what had happened for him to have such a notion.

"Nothing remarkable", he said, "but do you know whether our palace is haunted ?"

I said I was getting on to sixty years and my father had lived in its precincts all his life until he died when he was nearly eighty. "In our family, I have not heard any such thing. I have heard, of course, that some times, in the early morning, some of the stable hands have heard two horses galloping first in one direction and then in another, at which an odd horse

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or two in the stable would flutter and neigh. No one took any serious notice of it."

"Well," he commented, "I do not know about it and I do not think that should worry us the least bit. But I do feel uneasy and, to confess, I am dreadfully concerned. I do not like to tell you, Peshkarji, and yet I have to tell some one."

"Why don't you tell the Princess ? No one else need know", I suggested.

"That is precisely what I cannot do. To tell you the truth, my fears are all for her. Four days ago, when I was coming up here, I had the feeling that some strange riders were trotting along with me. I looked round and there was no one. Only my guards and horsemen were coming behind. I gave it no thought. When I got down from my horse, I felt that the others got down too."

"That left me with the uneasy feeling that there were some people accompanying me. You know what I mean. I could not sleep that night. I lay tossing on the bed with the consciousness of some strangers hovering around. I had the lights on and, once when I dozed off, I seemed to hear a voice. "Don't go back", it said. "Don't go back. If you do, you will lose the Princess".

"I am not superstitious and timid, as you know, but the thing looked so real. You can imagine what agony I have been in. I have stayed on here now for four days trying to get over this hallucination, taking this to be such a phenomenon. But I could not get over what I had heard and those strange happenings—I could not have made any mistake about them. The whole thing was too bad because I could not rest and I could not speak to anyone. The hunt

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has been stayed and I can see that the whole camp is restless over my unusual manner".

"Now that I have told you the secret, my heart appears less heavy, but how is that a solution ?"

I was naturally puzzled. This was not a problem any human agency could solve. The Rajkumar was obviously quite in his senses and knew what he was talking about. When people got such notions, however wild, and if they found that they had a semblance of reality or authenticity, they would be too paralysed to act. That is what had happened to him. I was neither too high an official in the palace hierarchy nor anyone's confidant in the palace, but I had come by this secret by the simple fact that I was the first person the Princess had run into that morning. This mission was now proving to be not only an embarrassing one but an extremely distressing one. What message would I take back to her and how could I help the Rajkumar?"

The Prince stood there leaning against the pillar biting his nails and I was standing near him not knowing what to do.

I found courage ultimately to tell him that he would have to take into confidence His Highness the Raja Saheb who, in his mature wisdom, would find a solution.

"I don't know", said the Prince. "I don't just know if that would be the right course. I would like to probe this mystery a bit. Would you join hands with me ?" he asked abruptly.

I inquired what plan he had in mind. Any move by him would create a stir and a storm. He seemed to be in deep thought and walked into the lodge and bade me sit down. This was unusual, for no servant of the royal household was allowed to sit anywhere

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in the premises of the palace and there was no question of this being done with a member of the royal family present. I, therefore, kept standing, until he put his hand on my shoulder and made me sit. He then walked up and closed the doors so that we would not be interrupted.

"I shall continue here," he said at last "and mount the hunt tomorrow so that everything appears normal. You will go back to the Princess and give my love and say that everything is well and that I delayed the hunt because of unfavourable weather and I should send word about my progress soon. For Heaven's sake, please do not tell her I am on the way back. I am not ready for that risk yet."

"In the meanwhile", he continued, "you please go back and, after delivering this message to the Princess, take your lodging in the stable. Tell those men what excuse you like. I think we should make a beginning with the early dawn noise of the galloping horses. You chase them if you can. Make an effort. Keep the best horse saddled and ready to ride out. Are you willing to take the risk?" he asked me with considerable hesitation.

I told him that no member of my family for generations had failed to honour the words of a member of the royal family and, in another sense, I had known the Princess from her birth and, apart from the devotion a servant gave to his king and queen, I loved her like a daughter and she always treated me with affection. "If I die without doing any good to you or the Princess, my regret will only be that I had failed to serve you. For the rest, I would risk anything and everything."

The Prince looked at me somewhat sombrely as

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if he felt that the mission he was giving me was a dangerous one, if all he had heard of ghosts and the like had any semblance of truth in them. Nevertheless, he sighed as if to say to himself he had no choice.

"Well, I wish you the best. Your job now rests on your own initiative and your own enterprise and the chances they yield to your advantage and ours. For myself, I shall try to forget the episode till I meet you again. If I do not meet you, well, I shall see to it that I meet no one else again".

That sounded ominous, but, by that time, we had worked ourselves into a strange mood of being made a plaything by some supernatural force. I took leave of him sadly and, early the next morning, I had delivered my message to the Princess. I wrote a brief note to the Diwan,* under whom I worked, asking for leave of absence for a few days.

That night, I went to the royal stable to borrow a horse and chose the best they had, moved out as if to ride away, but waited under the shadow of a grove for the dawn to come. The moonlight was bright though I was under cover and the picture of the spacious palace grounds was a magnificent one. I dozed off, but was woken up by the much-talked-about sound of the galloping horses. I sprang to my horse's saddle and chased the sound as they were retreating, keeping my bay to the lawns so that it produced the least noise.

The galloping steps did not go in the direction of the palace gates but seemed to heave over the high fence on one side of the palace boundary. My grand horse, under my prodding, made a mighty effort and I was chasing the sounds speeding after them.

* Chief Minister.

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Then the sounds abruptly ceased. I found myself in the midst of a wild wood, the shadows of the towering trees making fantastic designs with patches of light and shadow adding to the weirdness of the moment and my peculiar situation. There was no time to show any fear, for I told myself what was needed was vigilance for any presence or noise, anything which would give a clue to the mystery.

It seemed hours before anything stirred. The moon was moving down forecasting the arrival of the dawn. I got down from my horse and stood holding the bridle waiting for the slightest sound.

I was soon rewarded by two approaching shadows. They were people in some antique dress, I could see, though I couldn't see their features. One of the two was smaller and was perhaps a woman. I was determined not to show any fear. They came up near and one of them held up his hand showing a piece of cloth which looked like a laced stole or wide scarf women put round their necks to ward off the cold when walking in the open. I took it from them and they raised both their hands as if showing the shape of a helmet or crown on the head. They then trotted away and were lost in the mist.

I wished I could dismiss the whole incident as a dream, but I had with me the laced cloth the strange riders had placed in my hands. That made it all real. It occurred to me that the message, whatever it was, had to be delivered to the man who wore the crown, apparently the Raja himself. I thought for a moment whether I should take it to the Rajkumar, but I had now some kind of direction and I decided to be guided by it.

The next day, I rode to the palace and sought a

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private audience with the Raja. As I said, I was not high up in the palace official hierarchy, but was known as the son of an old and honoured palace official. It was hours before I could gain admission to the Raja's august presence. When His Highness saw me, he must have been struck by my frenzied appearance, but, before he could make any remark, I gave my humble obeisance to him and sought leave to speak to him alone on a matter of the gravest importance to the royal family. He was slightly annoyed, but waved away everyone else in the wide audience hall. But the Maharanee* did not take the hint, and, therefore, His Highness bade me follow him into his office chamber and closed the door.

"Well, what is it?" he asked me, now with obvious irritation.

I told him everything from the beginning—the Princess' message and what the Maharajkumar had told me, our talk in every detail and my subsequent escapade in the night and, finally, produced the laced cloth.

He gazed at it for a long while and then at me, but not any more annoyed but greatly excited. He told me to go and asked me to come again the next morning before his pooja** time when he would go into the prayer room where he would be alone every day for a short time. He warned me not to have any communication with anyone till then.

The next day when I reached the palace, I was taken straightway to His Holiness and I entered the prayer room with him.

"Do you know, in this ancient chamber, my an-

* Queen.
** Ritual Prayer.

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cestors have come for their prayer in each generation, for how many years I cannot tell" he told me. "No one, not even the queen has been here. I do not know by what strange chance you have become an exception."

Then he opened the tiny bureau where the statuette of the family deity was kept. He bowed his head in silence and, then, gently opened a drawer at the base and took out from it a scroll of paper or leather, I could not tell. But what was remarkable was that it was tied up in precisely a similar piece of lace-cloth that the two formless riders had given me in the wood on the dawn of the previous day.

He stared at the two pieces of cloth and slowly and deliberately unloosened the one covering the scroll. He opened it, read a few lines from it to himself, frowning as if he could not quite understand it. Then, he gave it to me. I could barely decipher it and, ultimately, with great difficulty, made out the following words inscribed in the local patois which I slowly read out with a trembling voice:

"The charge that our dynasty entrusted to you comes to an end with you. You should know that this kingdom does not rightly belong to us. My grandfather took possession of it by a piece of treachery on the death of the King and Queen by causing the dissolution of the heir to the throne and his consort. The old king on his death bed was stricken with grief for this sin. For this misdeed, the uncrowned king and consort has been haunting us and would continue to do so. I have had an intimation that this will continue till the kingdom is restored to the rightful owner. When that day comes, my dear great-great-grandson of the future, you will be informed of this truth. It will then

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be well for you to give up this kingdom and go as far away as you can with your family where God will provide you food and shelter. You will disobey this instruction at your peril. Do not allow the curse of the family to chase you to a bloody end, both for your sake and your dear ones."

That was what that mysterious epistle, to which the Raja was guided by the lace-cloth, said. The Raja, who seemed dazed, tied up the scroll again with the laced cloth and kept it in the drawer as it had been before.

"Well," he said turning to me with a pensive smile. "Is it not strange that you should have come into this deadly family secret ?"

I merely bowed in silence, not knowing what to say.

"Many questions arise now," he continued. "One, should I obey or disobey this strange command ? Two, what will happen if I do so ? Three, if I decide on the sacrifice, how should I hand over this burden and to whom ?"

We stood there in that solemn chamber, heavy with its stillness, unable to frame our confused thoughts.

"You are there in it, some way, somehow" said His Highness reverting to his mocking tone. "You had better think of a solution too." Then he signified to me to leave.

I had by this time become a stranger to myself, utterly confused. I decided to suspend judgement anyway, but, that evening, an urgent summons came to me from the palace. I rushed and was taken to his Highness. He was laid prostrate on his bed, his hands and face distorted, surrounded by the corps of state physicians who were wringing their hands saying they had

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never seen this kind of a massive paralysis before. The king, who could hardly speak, becokoned to me and in words awefully distorted, gasped: "I demurred and and you know what this means. There is no cure but one. May be, this is only the first warning. We must obey the command."

"You had better go again to the forest where you got this cloth, precisely at the hour you met them. Hand this back. Perhaps, they may have further directions for you. As for me, I am leaving the kingdom with my family but with no retinue. You have to keep this an absolute secret till I have made my moves in this behalf. I shall leave directions for the crowning of my successor if it is so willed and, then, I shall join the Maharajkumar who set the ball rolling."

"You meet me tomorrow with any message that you have. Then we shall see."

I was again accordingly mounted on my horse heading for that gloomy rendezvous with the formless and unknown strangers. They did appear in the same way in which they had come to me earlier. They took back the cloth which I extended to them and, as they rode off, I heard the galloping steps until they crossed the fence into the palace at precisely the same spot they had chosen earlier and rode towards the stables and then beyond. I had only the sound of the horse-steps to guide me to go behind them. They rode in the direction of a small hut where the sound ceased.

I was in front of a door and knocked. A young man opened the door. The dawn was breaking. Behind him came a beautiful woman. I had no doubt what this message meant. I took them to the king.

Leena came and sat on the chair in front and Shree also came in simultaneously.

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"Why, you look as if you are waking up from a dream", Shree exclaimed.

"May be," I said and then I told them the story.

"What a strange story", said Leena.

"I also think so," I said, "but, Leena, it is a little uncanny. The young man who opend that door was Shree and the beautiful woman who was with him was you."

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ISSRR

This story has its setting in a byegone age and in a State which has now lost its identtity. It is within living memory, however, that there was a State called Travancore, in the very south of India, ruled by a Maharaja, on whom the British Rulers of India had bestowed the honour of a 19-gun salute "in perpetuity". The British have gone and Travancore is now merged in Kerala and the Maharaja, for all purposes, legal, social and so on, is a common man.

It was not so when the incident narrated here took place. Turning back the pages of history, you come to the glorious reign (obsolete words cannot be excluded from this narrative) of Maharaja Marthanda Varma, celebrated as the maker of "modern" Travancore. He warred and won numerous battles, defeated lesser monarchs and annexed territory, assisted by an able Minister who was also his Commander-in-Chief.

When all the fighting was over and swords were down after the bloodshed, the Maharaja sat, his brow bent, stricken with grief. "How can I expiate for this holocaust which, in my ambition, I started. I have been the cause of the death of so many people".

His wise Minister agreed with him, but, as was his wont, had a solution ready. He told the Raja that his sins would not chase him if it was proved that he waged these wars not for himself, but, in the name of God, for the good of his people. The Maharaja clapped in joy. "And so, what do you say?"

"Your God," the Minister replied, "is your family deity, Vishnu, in the form of *Sri Padmanabha,* who is consecrated in the royal temple in the capital, Trivandrum, where you worship. Make an offering of all

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your conquests and all your wealth to him and lead the rest of your life as a trustee and may your successors in the royal line also do so."

The Raja had chosen his Minister well. He heartily agreed. The formula and the rituals were then and there designed. The Maharaja, with the aid of the legal luminaries of his court, executed documents transferring all his kingdom and personal wealth to the Lord of the temple *Sri Padmanabha* and, from then on, every ruler in his dynasty became *"Padmanabha Dasa"* (servant of Padmanabha). Simultaneously, an elaborate sacremental ceremony was planned, called *Murajapam,** to be performed once in six years, when Namboodiris (Brahmin high priests) would daily chant mantras for 56 days for several hours each day standing knee-deep in water in the tank adjoining the temple. *Murajapam* would go on for 56 days, the holy guests receiving the veneration of the ruling prince who would give them everything they would demand for the service. At the end of the 56 days, a fantastic festival of lights would be held, known as *"Laksha Deepam"* (the festival of a hundred thousand lights). The Maharaja thus fortified himself with reparatory paraphernalia against the evil effects of his "sins" as a conqueror, a concept unique in human history.**

* Ritual chanting of mantras (in Sanskrit).

** There was an extraordinary sequel to this melodramatic tradition. After Indian independence and British paramountcy over Indian States ended, when the Ruler of Travancore was asked by the successor government in New Delhi to accede to the Indian Union, the Maharaja replied that this accession was beyond his powers as, being a trustee of the deity, it was impossible for him to transfer the trust. The famous "iron man" of the Indian Congress, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, declared that the Prince might sign the accession and he would thereafter deal directly with the deity. The kingdom, established by the glorious Marthanda Varma thus came

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A reference has now to be made about the word *Khar-khatal* before we proceed with the story. *Khar-Khatal* in the Bhojpuri language means the dried mash of cooked vegetables sticking to cooking vessels which lazy servants and house-wives leave unscraped, despite the continuing use of the vessel.

Now for the story. Another sixth year (long years after Marthanda Varma's time) had come and *Murajapam* was round the corner. Namboodiris were moving from the northern areas in hundreds towards Trivandrum, Travancore's capital, for the 56-day ceremony. They came by country carts ambling along roads or by little canoes rowed over the backwaters till they touched land at a convenient point.

One of these groups, numbering some 50, who travelled in covered canoes (called locally 'vallams') was caught in a storm and was being pushed into the open sea by the wind. If it had persisted, the result would have been a disaster. But the Namboodiris prayed hard and nature responded. The valiant boatsmen, who fought against odds, ultimately brought the boats to a small port called Varkala, some 30 miles from Trivandrum. The Namboodiris, who were ortho-

to an end, Travancore later becoming a part of the present Kerala.

But, today, the ruler has been graciously granted the custodianship of the temple, enabling him to uphold his treaty with the deity with the assets now reduced to his personal wealth maintaining the fiction that all his personal wealth is still held in the name of Sri Padmanabha though his investments are now spread in different parts of India, subject to the laws of the Indian Republic providing for Income-tax, wealth tax, etc. In the meanwhile, the holy high priests, the Namboodiris, have become economically so backward for various reasons that large sections of them are claiming from the local and the national government special privileges accorded to "backward classes" in regard to education, employment, etc.

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dox Brahmins, would not eat without having their bath and their daily spiritual exercises. The boats docked eight hours later than the scheduled time. Coming out from hours of terror, tired and famished, the Namboodiris landed and rushed to the nearest temple, where, as was their wont during these journeys, they would lodge.

The dusk was far gone and night was deepening when they reached the temple and told the priests their story. They were dying of hunger, they said, and should be fed. It was the tradition in these temples for Brahmin travellers to be housed and fed, but there was no arrangement for night visitors of this kind. The temple priests were embarrassed and irritated, but they knew these were the august guests of the Maharaja and any lack of attention, on their part, would mean inviting severe punishment.

The priests accordingly promptly gave their salutations of welcome to the guests and requested them to have their bath in the adjoining tank while food was got ready for them. The priests apologetically explained that, the hour being late, they were helpless to give them the food worthy of them and they should be pardoned for their shortcomings. The Namboodiris said they would be happy if they had only rice and any salt dish and they would bless the priests and commend their good work to the Maharaja.

The priests, (priests in these temples could also cook) however, found their task very difficult. They could manage the rice, which was in plentiful supply in all temples owing to the Maharaja's grace. But, they could not find any vegetables and they were up against a wall. Suddenly, one of the priests, an imaginative cook, had an idea. He said, they could

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scrape up the *khar-khatal* from the big vessels and, with a little salt and chillies, they could prepare a curry and make the best of it on the whole.

The Namboodiris hurried with their bath and prayers and assembled for the promised grub. The cooks served the dinner and the Namboodiris ate with gusto, particularly relishing the concoction which passed for a vegetable curry. They cheered the cook and promised to commend his performance to the Maharaja. One Namboodiri cried out that he had never tasted anything so good before: "What is this curry?" he asked.

The perplexed cook, who had never had an adventure like this before, was afraid that, if the matter was gone into in detail, the cooks might get into trouble as scraping up *Khar Khatal* from unwashed vessels would be objected to by orthodox Brahmins. He told them that how the dish was prepared was a trade trick on which they should not ask questions.

"Tell us its name at least," persisted the Namboodiri. Baffled for a moment, the priest numbled something which sounded like *Issrr*.

"Issrr! Never heard of it, but you can call it manna from heaven. We are certainly going to ask for this from the Maharaja when we reach Trivandrum."

The cooks were not happy over this prospect and the matter rested there. The Namboodiris resumed their journey on the next day and everything was forgotten so far as the priests were concerned.

This was not so with the Namboodiris. When they met the Ruler on reaching Trivandrum, their adventure was the story of the day. But they regarded all this as a providential blessing because it enabled

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them to eat the finest of vegetable curries called "*Issrr.*"

"Issrr? Issrr, Issrr?" exclaimed the Maharaja who could not understand what he heard. "I have never heard of such a curry".

"Oh, Your Highness must taste it to believe. There is nothing like it under the sun. We want it and it must be served for our lunch as early as Your Highness can arrange it".

The Maharaja duly promised to fulfil their wish. The *Issrr* was finally traced to the priests of the Varkala temple and, by royal command, they were brought to the palace and ushered in before the Ruler.

The priests were in panic that their service to the Namboodiris had angered the Maharaja. But, they were surprised to find that the ruler was not only pleased but he wanted them to serve the same dish to all the Namboodiris assembled in the capital for the *Murajapam.*

The priests were shocked and fell at the feet of the ruler saying they should be excused from such an obligation.

"We beg of Your Highness not to command us to cook this curry", they besought him, but the Prince would hear none of it.

"If you are not going to do this, you will be dealt with severely," said His Highness.

The priests cursed their evil stars and blamed the ingenuity of the young man who had suggested the *Khar Khatal* curry. They were in great woe. If they refused they were going to be punished. On the other hand, if how they prepared the curry became known, they would be in trouble also. After a few minutes, they sought a special audience with the ruler again.

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"Since we have to carry out your command, we beg of your Highness to give us some special privileges," they said. On the Ruler nodding assent, the cooks said:

"We would like to have the kitchen exclusively for us and nobody must be allowed to come in when we are preparing this curry". The Maharaja was surprised by this strange request, but agreed saying that they should somehow serve *Issrr* to the Namboodiris.

Armed with this *carte blanche,* that night the cooks entered the royal kitchen where food was prepared for 5000 Namboodiris and ordered that the day's vessels should not be washed! They also ordered everyone out of the premises. Since they had the backing of the royal command, nobody could obstruct them. They closed all the doors and bolted them. Then began the arduous task of scraping all the huge vessels for the *Khar Khatal.* Their work took them practically the whole night and then, just as they did at their temple in Varkala, they added salt and chillies with buckets full of water making a brown concoction like the one prepared before. The smell was unpleasant, but they had no choice.

Word went round among the Namboodiris the next morning that *Issrr* was going to be served for that day's lunch. They all assembled well in time after finishing their daily chant of the mantras. The only people under tension were the cooks who, when the time came, brought their stock of *Issrr* to the dining hall.

The Namboodiris were surprised when they found that, instead of the wonderful flavour they had enjoyed in Varkala, they were noticing that this *Issrr* was not giving a pleasant smell. The feeling became one of

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shock when they actually tasted it. It was a miserable mixture of salt and all kinds of crude condiments and they decided at once that the poor Maharaja had been cheated by the cooks. They left their lunch and, without delay, a delegation waited on the Ruler to report the foul play.

The Ruler heard them and was greatly agitated. He was mortified that the Varkala cooks should have thus ill-treated the royal guests. He promised them a full inquiry and due punishment to the guilty. The Namboodiris were then given the food prepared by the local experts.

The cooks were again brought before the Ruler, this time escorted by the police. The Maharaja took them to task for deceiving him and his respected guests.

They once again fell on their knees and broke into tears. They told him that this was exactly what they had feared and why they had been reluctant to prepare this curry.

Then came the full story in detail about how the Namboodiris reached Varkala temple late in the night, tired and hungry and how, finding no other means, they prepared the concoction from the *khar khatal* which the Namboodiris relished because, in their hunger, they would have gobbled anything. They said they would never do this again, even if the Namboodiris came starving for want of food.

The Maharaja realised what had happened and, after a full laugh, said he could not make up his mind whether to punish or reward them. In any case, he was sorry that the Namboodiris had to be disaappointed. After due thought, he rewarded the cooks for

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their enterprise and instructed them not to show themselves again anywhere in the town.

The next day, the Namboodiris were told that the naughty cooks had been punished for their misdeameanour and dismissed from the royal household. The Namboodiris were sorry that they had now to accept that they had lost the chance of getting their *Issrr* for ever. They regretted they had tasted the divine curry at all, since they would have then never known what they were missing. The cooks as well as the Ruler fully concurred with them.

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THE BELLS AND THE SIREN

I

Your little story goes with you
And the world will pass you by

"Hei Cuckoo! Where the hell have you come from? I haven't seen you for ages. How splendid, all dressed up in silk—and gold watch!"

The young laughing man raised both his hands in surprised recognition and greeting. He was in his working clothes with his worn-out khaki pants rolled up a few inches from the bottom and a faded blue half-shirt covering his torso. An intelligent face with a complexion tanned to darkness and an athletic build, in a different environment he would be regarded as handsome.

He rushed towards the man whom he had greeted, but stopped short of embracing him though this had obviously been his intention.

"My hands are all dirty with grease and oil", he said as if by way of apology.

"You, Rattan, what a joy," the other young man said in obvious pleasure. "You have become such a big, strong fellow, I could have hardly recognised you".

"I can very well understand", said Rattan. "Let me see. It must be more than fifteen years since we saw each other last. We were eleven or twelve, that should be. It seems a thousand years ago. I can't think of that old school without feeling dreamy about our pranks. You look so rich and prosperous. Tell me all about it".

"Yes, Rattan, you are right. We are rich and prosperous. You remember, my father was a Munshi*

* Accountant-cum-manager.

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to that big Lala* and, eventually, having no children, he took my father as his partner. When the old man died followed soon after by his wife, my father came to own the firm. Since he had really run the show even when the Lala was there, my father could build it up and we have now expanded and own a big textile mill in Ghaziabad.** We have also some other industries and, by the grace of God, we are very well off. Will you believe, I am the Managing Director of the Mill."

"My God, Cuckoo, I can't believe it. You are the Head of such a big company? I think I know your mill—it is the Sharda mills in Ghaziabad, isn't it? O, yes, I can understand, it is named after you. In school, you were Sharda Prasad, but we used to call you Cuckoo. What a thundering story!"

"You are right, Rattan," replied his friend. "My father attributed his good fortune to me as he joined the Lala when I was born and thereafter there was no looking back for him. We have a big bungalow in Ghaziabad now but come to Delhi quite often. You know, business and all that. We have also got a small house here. What a pleasant surprise meeting you!"

"Well, I have also got along and am happy, though far from prosperous", said Rattan. "Come and sit, will you? I have a chair and I hope it will not soil your clothes. Have a coke?"

He called his Assistant, a dirty-looking urchin of 15 or 16, gave him two rupees and asked him to get two Coca Colas.

"My story is very very short. My father left his job in the Municipal Committee, married another

* Rich businessman.
** Thirty miles from Delhi.

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woman, left my mother and me. In short, he deserted us when I was still in high school. The one thing he could not do was to throw us into the street because my mother owned the little house we lived in and, when he went away without a word, we continued to live there.

"I could not continue at school and had to work. My mother too took to sewing and I got a job as Assistant to this cycle shop owner. I learnt my craft here and am now an expert on cycle repair. After some time, the man who owned this shop got a trade agency and wanted to wind up the shop. My mother and I thought we would make this our business. So, we sold our house and bought the shop from him. There are two small rooms uptairs and we live here. I married last year and we are a happy though a poor family. How do you like my shop—The All-Clear Cycle Repair Workshop. This is the name I gave the shop after I got it. You see the five cycle bells hanging from a string below my name board. I add a bell for every new year of my shop's life. Nobody can miss my shop. See those bells shining there. Let any man bring any splintered up cycle and I assemble it back and give it to him and he can ride away. I make some Rs. 200 to Rs. 300 a month. I am quite happy. Now, there is the Coke. Let us drink to old times".

Sharda Prasad, "Cuckoo" to Rattan, looked around, found the place dirty and dusty but finally decided to sit in the chair carefully not to spoil his beautiful suit. He sipped the Coke and said:

"I am very happy, Rattan, you are on your own, though I do think you deserve a better life. I can

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offer you a nice job, but I don't know how you will take it".

"Very nice of you to say that, Cuckoo," replied Rattan taking his seat on a big wooden box nearby. "You know, this is my own shop though, between you and me, it is a hard life. I cannot rest for a minute during the day and it is a dog's life from morning to evening. But, it is something to have your own shop. My wife is a believer in 'service'—her father is a clerk with an 8-hour job which, she says, is a very happy one with no responsbilities. But, I feel this shop is my baby. I built it up. The man, who was here before me, was a lazy boor and the shop earned only what a novice like me could. But today, see, I am busy all the time. This is a busy market centre and the "All Clear" is a household name in these parts. I allow some credit also to known customers and keep three cycles for hire. It is not bad on the whole".

"I am happy, Rattan, you think so", his friend said as he got up. "I rarely come to these parts, but we have a dealer somewhere here who has been dodging payment. As he has been our man for several years, I thought I would have a talk with him and get him round. I have parked my car at that junction there and am looking for his place".

"Who is this ?" asked Rattan. "I know every bloke up here".

"The fellow's shop has a big name: "Bharat International Textiles", but I have not been able to see the grand board so far".

"Ha, ha", laughed Rattan. "It is our Chandu Ram, the fat grumpy. He says he is a sole agent and works through sub-agents. You walk about a hundred yards this way and turn into the lane on the right. You will

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see the board—there is more of the Board than the shop.

"Thank you very much, Rattan. If I can be of any help, do not hesitate to ask".

"I know I can do that, now that I have seen you again".

As Sharda Prasad walked away, Rattan returned to his work. A customer was due to come back soon to take his cycle. He called his assistant and shouted at him in the manner of all petty bosses. He was still at work when his client came for his bicycle. To make up for the delay, Rattan offered him coke and tea, but the exasperated customer merely wanted his cycle back. It was nearly dusk when the man went away on his cycle after paying him.

The All-Clear Cycle shop closed down with the coming on of the night. That night, Rattan told his wife and mother about meeting his old friend who had become a rich man. In the general manner of many women, they began discussing how they could make use of him for the betterment of the family. His mother had stopped sewing work because of the strain for her eyes. She was getting old now and, in that cramped house which was right in the midst of a bazar, she was always weary with the noise and bustle. Rattan, however, was quite satisfied with his workshop and he said he would gradually develop it and try to get a cycle-selling agency.

But the idea, it appeared, came too late to him for someone else had the idea first. A year almost had gone since he met Cuckoo, when Rattan found that one of the big shops across the street was being vacated and signs of a new shop being opened were evident. He was by nature not a curious type and also Rattan's daily work really kept him busy. Sometimes he used

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to wonder whether if he had taken up some other work, he might have earned more. After all, cycle-users belonged to the poorest middle class and they paid him small amounts for long hours of tedious work. He did not pay much for the boy who was assisting him, but he had to pay him for his grub. These urchins were a bother too. They came under the pretence of learning work and finally left stealing a tool or two and he would never see them again. It was all in the game, however, as he had to have someone to order about for odd jobs. If he got that cycle agency and managed to get a little more space, he should be much better off, though not rich like Cuckoo.

It was not long before that Rattan learnt that the new shop which was opening was a cycle shop. He watched it taking shape with a good amount of bitterness as if some one had stolen his idea. Finally, a big name board was fixed calling the shop: "Bharat Cycles (P) Ltd." Below the name in small letters were written: "Cycles of all brands on sale here: Repairs and renovations undertaken".

This was indeed a big blow for Rattan. The next morning as he looked out of his window, he saw a big board with screaming red letters—"Repairs and Renovations", etc.

"What does it matter to me ?" he said to himself. "I shall have my trade".

But poor Rattan was mistaken. In a few days, the shop was full of brand new bicycles with their shining chromium and big advertising placards with pictures of half-clad girls riding bicycles. Rattan swore under his breath. But, soon he found, he had himself to go to that shop to buy spare parts for his needs, although this was painful. He could not keep stocks himself

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as this meant some investment and he was living as it was on a marginal income.

Gradually, he found that his customers were drifting to the new shop. They had some new gadget to fix up punctures and, often enough, offered to exchange repaired tubes and tyres which would save the customers time and inconvenience. They had their own spray-painting arrangements at the back of the shop. A time came when Rattan found that he was spending more time waiting for customers than serving them.

His wife and mother were egging him on to seek the help of his rich friend, but Rattan was shy to make a request having bragged to him the other day that he was doing well by himself and was happy. In the meantime, the days ran into weeks and poor Rattan found he could not find money even to buy repair materials. The shop in front was standing all the time before him like some monster trying to pounce and eat him up.

Eventually, he composed a letter in a very half-hearted way, doubting in his own mind the wisdom of asking for a loan which, almost certainly, he would not be able to repay. What could he do with a loan ? To start another shop, he would have to move to new premises and how could he get that much of money from Cuckoo ? In any case, there was no harm in sounding Cuckoo and he would take a chance. After all, it was by chance that Cuckoo had run into him after many years.

But letter-writing was something different from repairing bi-cycles and poor Rattan found his job a very hard, if not an impossible, one. He could not get anyone's help also, as he did not want anyone to know. Finally, the following letter emerged:

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"My dear, beloved friend Cuckoo. Greetings. Thank you for meeting me one day last February and sharing Coca Cola with me. My mother sends you her blessings. How are you and how is business ? Mine is doing well, as I told you. But there is some trouble as business is dull because of "Bharat Cycles" taking away all work from me. What about a little help for me, just as you offered the other day like a beloved brother. Please think for me. Can I open another shop ? Frankly, I am a working man. I can work with my hands, but I don't know business. Any way, I shall try, if you send me Rs. 1000 by return post. Can you spare so much money ? But I am your beloved friend and, if I am able to open a new shop and earn more, I shall return it.

We are going to have a baby. You didn't tell me, brother, whether you were married. Thus your ever dear beloved friend— Rattan

My address: Shri Ram Rattan Lal Sharma
All Clear Cycle Repair Workshop
2091/2A, Hamilton Street
Old Delhi.

Rattan was not clear about Cuckoo's address, but he remembered Sharda Mills., Ghaziabad, and had registered that Cuckoo had said that he was Manager and Director. That should be enough, he thought, and he wrote the address that way and, after taking his mother's blessings, posted his letter.

The next week to his pleasant surprise, he received a huge envelope and printed on the top was "Sharda Mills (P) Ltd.", Ghaziabad. He was full of excitement and wondered whether Cuckoo had sent any bank cheque, in which case he would not be able to encash it as he had no bank account. He told his Assistant

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to keep watch for a while and rushed to the back of his shop from where his residence above had to be reached through a narrow stair-case. He shouted to his mother that Cuckoo had sent the money. He opened the envelope carefully with a pin lest the contents should be torn and read the beautifully-typed letter:

Shri Ram Rattan Lal Sharma
All Clear Cycle Repair Workshop
etc.

With reference to your letter to the Managing Director, Shri Sharda Prasad Agarwal, I wish to state that the M.D. is out of station and is expected back early next week.

Your letter will be placed before him on his return and his orders will be communicated to you.

Yours faithfully
(Illegible)
Private Secretary to the Managing Director,
Sharda Mills, Ghaziabad.

Rattan was obviously disappointed. But he consoled his wife and mother saying that, if he was away from Ghaziabad, naturally how could he reply? But he must tell Cuckoo when he met him again that confidential letters from dear friends like him should not be opened by his Secretary. His request for a loan from Cuckoo would now be the talk of the town in Ghaziabad. Rattan could not, despite his proprietorship of All Clear Cycle Repair Workshop, imagine that Sharda Mills and adjoining associated companies had some 3000 workers and Shri Sharda Prasad Agarwal had three Secretaries, not one, and his daily post was never opened by him if addressed to his office. He

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came to know about all that and much more about Shri Agarwal later.

He waited for the next month to get the promised reply from his friend and it reached him duly. This was also, to his shock, from the Private Secretary

To Shri Ram Rattan Lal Sharma

etc.

Dear Sir,

With reference to your letter addressed to Shri Sharda Prasad Agarwal, Managing Director, Sharda Mills (P) Ltd., I am to state that the company has no arrangements to give such loans to private parties.

I am, however, enclosing an application form for a post in the company. I am desired to request you to fill this up and send it to our Director of personnel and I am to assure you that this will be given due consideration.

I remain, Sir,
Yours faithfully,
(Illegible)
Private Secretary to the Managing Director
Sharda Mills (P) Ltd., Ghaziabad.

The first paragraph of this letter had been scored off in green ink and, at the bottom of the letter, was a note written by hand with the same ink.

"Don't hesitate to send this application. This is a formality. I have instructed my office to take you on a good salary with residential quarters. Best of luck".

Sd/-
Sharda Prasad

Rattan was happy as well as sad. Although the letter was a formal one, Cuckoo had shown his regard

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by his personal note in his own handwriting. "He has meant well", Rattan said to himself. Perhaps, this was the way with rich people.

Now, Rattan had no other way but to seek some friendly help to fill up the application. This became necessary as both his mother and wife opted in favour of Rattan taking up the job which would give him a salary at the beginning of each month and his friend had indicated that he would provide a house also. His mother said, that, if they sold his shop and the rooms above it, they would get a lump sum to begin a new life. On the whole, it was settled that his expected offspring was bringing him luck and Rattan should jump at it.

He got hold of a friend who was a clerk in a company and, together, they filled up the form on a Sunday. His friend told him that since the job was in a textile mill, it was not necessary for him to mention that he was a cycle repair expert, but Rattan would not accept this sensible suggestion saying that he had no other qualification and Cuckoo would misunderstand if he did not state his qualifications fully. So Rattan's expertise in cycle repair was put down in great detail with an impressive description of the "All-Clear Cycle Repair Workshop" to reinforce his status in his field. On the point of salary required, Rattan said, he would rather mention the maximum he was earning earlier rather than the small amount he earned now. "I have already told him I was getting about Rs. 300. You should not add or reduce. That is not good, you know", Rattan said.

So, the application was duly signed and sent by registered post. From then on, Rattan lost interest in his work and spent most of his time at his house speculating on the job he was going to get and what life

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would be in Ghaziabad. He had not the foggiest notion of what a job would be like. Since the age of 14, he had been working in a cycle shop and he knew no other work. "It must be good", he told his mother. "Cuckoo is my very dear friend and, once I go there, he knows, I will be of great help to him".

Within a week, the expected letter came from the Ghaziabad Mill offering him a job on Rs. 300 per month with residential accommodation in the class to which he was elegible at a rental value of 10 per cent of his salary. He would also get the permissible allowances which would work out to Rs. 80 per month. He should intimate his acceptance of the appointment by reply post to "the undersigned", the Director of Personnel, Sharda Mills (P) Ltd., and join within 10 days thereafter.

Rattan was pleased with the salary and the promptness of the reply, but could not help feeling distressed that the letter was again signed by somebody and not his friend Cuckoo. In fact, he was quite upset, but the offer was too good to be rejected. His mother and wife were overjoyed as it was a long time since they had seen Rs. 300 in a month and now it was going to be Rs. 380 and with a house. They would also have a lump sum from the sale of the shop and flat above.

But ten days was too short a time to pull out one's establishment and the physical effort was rendered more difficult by the emotional strain in Rattan's mind of giving up the place he had built up by his labour and the environment with which he had grown. "One thing is certain. I have been a free man and my own boss. I have not *salaamed* anybody. "But take that", he said to himself "with the fact that I had

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no money also and, especially during the last few months, the going has been really hard."

There was no buyer for his premises. The place was too small for any but the type of business he ran and the whole building was totally dilapidated, a fact which Rattan did not realize until some people, who came to see the shop, pointed out to him how dangerously he had lived under a roof which might have come down any time.

In brief, try as he might to find a buyer, he failed. And he had to leave for Ghaziabad in another three days!

In a casual talk, one of the workers in the Bharat Cycles, which was the cause of his uprooting, suggested to him that he might approach its proprietor who might use it as a godown for his stock. This was the most unkindest cut of all for Rattan, but there was no way out.

The next morning, he was waiting for the proprietor of the Bharat Cycles to come. He walked up and greeted him. He was quite friendly till Rattan told him his purpose. Then, he became serious and asked in a typical business man's language, what he could do when he had such a big shop in the locality ?

"You can use it as a godown" Rattan suggested remembering what the working hand in the shop had mentioned to him the previous day.

"Yes, that is so, but your building is so old. It may crumble down any day. I don't want to undertake any building work now. Further, it will be unfair to you if I make an offer only for the site which will be too low. I am very sorry, my friend, you try someone else".

Rattan was in a fix. His clock was ticking too

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fast for him and there was no other buyer. And what that man had said about the building was true. After a lot of polite higgling and haggling, Rattan agreed to an offer of Rs. 2000. Rattan had offered all the tools and odds and ends in the shop, which would not be of use to him any more, to persuade the big man to agree to the price.

"I am sorry", Rattan told him, "you have to arrange all the formalities as I have only just time to pack up and go", and so it was agreed.

Rattan and his family, with two or three brand new trunks he had bought (he had never travelled before) for all his goods, took the morning train for Ghaziabad. The previous day. he saw the new owner bringing down his board "The All-Clear Cycle Repair Workshop" and he went uptairs to his room unable to check his tears. Finally when he left, he did not turn back. It was a dream which had come to an end and he must take it, he felt, he was walking into a new morning.

Indeed, all the excitement of getting into the train, helping his aged mother and wife, was a new experience and Rattan was in a mood of optimism. After all, an assured income of Rs. 380 per month with a house added, was surely worth some sacrifice.

Rattan did not know that the Ghaziabad mills was some 10 miles from the Railway station. The sale money of the house had been very helpful in the transfer to Ghaziabad and he took a taxi to the mills, an expenditure he could have never in the past dreamt of undertaking.

It was midday when he reached the big gate of the mills and the gate-keeper guided him to a small office where he could make enquiries about where he could

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lodge. Rattan dispensed with the taxi and, asking his mother and wife to wait in the shade, he went and showed his appointment letter to the man in charge of this little outer office. Rattan told him that he was new to the place and he would be grateful for any help he could give, which the officer would not regret as the Managing Director was an old pal of his.

This man had apparently heard such stories before, but he was kind nevertheless and asked them to move to a transit depot where they could put their things. Then Rattan could report to the Personnel Officer with his appointment letter, whereafter he would be informed of his allotment of residential accommodation.

Fortunately, his mother had brought some food with her as old women do during travel. Rattan, who was tired and hungry found there were no facilities for bathing in this "Depot". He tried to freshen himself by changing into a new pant and shirt he had bought before leaving Delhi. Unaccustomed to any kind of sophistication, he had chosen his ware in lurid colours and, together with the smell of new over-starched cloth, he made an altogether comic sight, which was by no means relieved by a happy smiling face he presented on the prospect of his moving into a new and attractive environment.

He was sent over to the Reception room and, from there, escorted by a peon to a massive building. Only then, did he realize what a huge and mighty organisation his friend Cuckoo controlled. Was he the big boss? Was that crooky looking munshi to the old Lala the owner of all this magnificience? Rattan was in a state of wonder. As far as the eye could see, he saw big buildings spread all over one behind the other.

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Rattan was taken to an office room and asked to wait. His name with the purpose of his visit was taken down in a chit and taken away. "All these formalities", Rattan mused to himself, "will disappear when they know I am Cuckoo's friend". After half an hour, he was called in and an aged bald man with spectacles half-down his nose, told him that, if he had come in the morning, he would have started getting his salary from that day. But now, after 12 noon, he would not normally be allowed to join. He would nevertheless allow him to sign the Register so that he could move into his house and report for duty from the next day. The mill hours were from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with an hour for lunch. Saturday and Sunday would be holidays. He should report the next morning to the Attendance Clocking Department Superintendent. The officer instructed his peon to show him his office and then take Rattan Lal to the Housing Superintendent.

Rattan began to explain that he had come to the mill because of very special circumstances and he meant to hint about his friendship with Cuckoo. But the officer dismissed him brusquely wishing him all the best in his new job.

Rattan and his family found his two-roomed house with a verandah an excellent one, though it was one of eight flats in that four-storey block. There were numerous blocks of this type and then numerous smaller ones and a smaller number of bigger ones. Again, he was struck by the dimensions of Cuckoo's and his family's prosperity. They must be millionaires several times over, he thought.

Their neighbours, who all turned up to their houses soon after five in the mill buses, were very nice to

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them. They told them there were canteens where they could buy all they wanted. And Rattan and his family settled in the new surroundings. Before he went to bed, he was told that the bosses were very strict on puntuality and he must be at the bus stand in the morning at 10 minutes to Eight. It was at the tip of Rattan's tongue to say that all this would not apply to him because of his special relations with Cuckoo. "But why should I tom tom about this to these people", he thought and merely told them he would be there in time. Rattan did not know that he was going to work in the department which enforced this puntuality.

This was revealed to him the next day when he met his office Superintendent. He asked him where Rattan had been working before and was shocked to hear Rattan's story. Rattan, by now, was careful not to declare too much of his friendship with the boss and merely said he knew him well. The superintendent was not impressed because he felt that if he had really such a backing, he would have been taken in a much bigger job than that of an assistant in the clocking department. He was shown how the clocking machine worked as each worker came in and left, how the cards were assembled and put together again in the machine for the next day. Rattan's job was to see that this was done.

"I do not know", the Superintendent said, "why we need a special man for this job. Apparently, the boss has found a job where you have no work and can draw a salary. You can be happy, you won't have to repair cycles any more".

Rattan found that he had no work at all. He tried to see what his four assistants were doing, but

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they knew the job better and they ignored him. One of them, however, took pity on him and gave him his job to handle and Rattan was mightily pleased.

In any case, Rattan said he would have to speak to Cuckoo about this "No-job employment!" He told his Superintendent about his intention and was advised to be discreet.

"You cannot go anywhere near the Chief's office, my dear fellow", the Superintendent said, "You have first to see the Personnel Officer for which you require my permission which I cannot give, because, if I give it, I will be hauled up. You have the Personnel Officer, the Director of Personnel and then the General Manager and the Private Secretary to the Managing Director between you and Shri Sharda Prasad Agarwal. You have a good job. I advise you to try to keep it, even by bringing a bed here and sleeping for eight hours".

Rattan found his position most humiliating. "O, my God, was I not more happy in my All-Clear Workshop?" he exclaimed to himself as he reached home that evening and told the story to his family. But they asked him to be wise and said there was nothing wrong with the job.

A whole month passed with the hours of the day hanging heavy like lead on poor Rattan's heart. The only relief he found was that his Office Superintendent revealed himself to be a garrulous man and they spent the hours of the day talking and, by the end of the month, knew each other's story very well.

Rattan was a very happy man on salary day when the money was brought to his office by a junior cashier. His mother and wife were in transport when he reached home. He told them that he had gathered that there

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was also a small free hospital there with a Gynaecological department. He would not have to spend any money for his wife's forthcoming confinement.

When every means of spending time was exhausted, Rattan began to regret why he ever left his All-Clear Workshop and came to this hell where he was a prisoner. His work was regulated by four siren hoots, once at 8 a.m., to enter office, at 12-30 p.m. for lunch and 1-30 p.m. for the close of the lunch hour and 5 p.m. to mark the hour for the journey home. There were queues everywhere—lining up in the morning for the bus, for the card punching at the entrance, for the lunch at the staff-service canteen and for the seat in the bus in the evening. Everyday was like every other day. Rattan thought he would become the wall, the doors, pillars, the noises and the siren of this mill. He was certainly a part of it. "O, God, why have you brought me to this?" he would say every morning when he prayed. The morning prayer was a new occupation which he had started after coming to the mill. He had no need for it when he earned his few pies in his cycle shop.

At the end of the second month, he decided to make an effort to see his friend, the Chief of this gigantic machine into which he had been screwed in. He was defeated at every turn. Cuckoo, it seemed, lived barricaded by some kind of human or inhuman fortification. He could not even get a glimpse of him.

In desperation, one evening, he decided to wait outside the factory gate and catch him when he drove out home. He learnt that he left usually a few minutes before the closing hours of the day to avoid the factory crowd. Rattan took permission to leave his department a little earlier, walked to the main gate and waited

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there. The sentry pushed him to one side. but Rattan managed to shout loudly, "Cuckoo" as the big Mercedes Benz came out driven by a uniformed chaffeur. The car slowed down for a second, the Chief turned to see Rattan, looked at him frowning and asked the chaffeur to proceed.

Rattan was shocked. His friend, his dear friend of his school days! He had passed him by without heeding his call.

The next morning he received a note from the Director of Personnel to meet him. The Superintendent was in awe as this was a unique event. He personally escorted Rattan to the Director's office but was stopped at the entrance. Only Mr. Rattan Lal Sharma had been called, he was told. The poor man returned to his office.

The Director of Personnel informed Rattan that the Managing Director wanted to meet him. Rattan was immensely happy and thanked the Director. He was asked to wait until he was sent for. After a few minutes, a messenger came for him and he was taken to a separate wing of that building which was the office of the Managing Director and his personal staff. The big doors opened. Rattan walked into a huge office with a big shining table, behind which sat the old friend of his school days, his Cuckoo.

"Rattan Lal", Cuckoo spoke, raising his hand in a gesture asking him to listen, "I think I have done you some good for old memory's sake. But I want you to remember that there is no more Cuckoo and Rattan in the Sharda Mill. If you call me Cuckoo or talk to me again or attempt to see me or talk to anyone about the old days, you will lose your job in this orga-

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nisation. I am sorry, but, placed as we are, there is no way out. Please remember this".

Before Rattan could utter a word, a uniformed guard came in and the big man asked him to escort Mr. Rattan Lal Sharma to his office.

That evening, Rattan saw through his window the big Mercedes Benz glide out of the M.D.'s office. His friend was seated inside smoking a cigar. The siren sounded. Rattan ran to line up in the queue for the bus. The Mercedes Benz passed by. The siren was still blowing.

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THE BELLS AND THE SIREN

II

"..... I remembered how often you and I had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky"

The Minister smiled as he took the letter in his hand. He was seated at his big rose-wood table in the office room of his stately mansion and a peon near him was opening his daily dak* addressed to him by name. Deferentially and carefully, the man would open one envelope after another, unfold each letter and place it on the table to the left of the Minister who would read them and write his instructions.

He was a strikingly handsome man and his fifty and odd years sat lightly on him. The bushy hair was all grey, but his excellent health and a youthful, ebullient expression would impress anyone of the vigour and nobility of his mind. He was wearing the familiar type of white khaddar kurta Congressmen generally wore with a waist-coat, or Jawahar jacket** as it was called, and the white Congress cap he wore was on the table. He removed it whenever he was at work in his office.

The letter amused him, for it recalled all kinds of memories, pleasant and unpleasant. He was not much of a philosopher, but this letter did make him, not nostalgic but reflective on how people changed as they were confronted by vicissitudes which came with the passing years. What better proof could there be of this than the letter before him? He read:

* Post.
** So-called because Jawaharlal Nehru used to wear this.

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"Respected Rattanlalji,†

I have avoided writing to you personally for obvious reasons. But I find I have no alternative but to make a personal appeal to you to help in a cause which, I am sure, will interest you as much as it concerns me. Could we meet for a discussion at any time at your convenience? I shall come to Delhi on hearing from you. I shall be very grateful for an early reply.

Yours sincerely,
Sd/- S. P. Agarwal."

The Hon. Minister pressed a bell on one side of his table for his stenographer who rushed in humbly with his shorthand book and pencil.

"Can you take a short note to a friend of mine? Please type it on my personal letter-head", said the Minister and began:

"I was happy to hear from you after many years and I hope you are well. I hope to be in Delhi for the best part of next month as the Parliament is in session, but, as my time is not my own when the House sits, could you kindly come any day after fixing up the time with my Secretary? If you come in the evening, I shall be happy if you can stay on for dinner.

With warm regards,

Please type that leaving the address and signature space blank. I shall write this in my own way, as it is a personal letter. And when Mr. Agarwal telephones to you, please fix up an interview for him without delay. When the stenographer brought the typed letter to him, he wrote in the space provided at the top "My dear Cuckoo" and put his signature: "Rattan".

† The addition of 'ji' is an expression of respect.

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"Have this posted please, along with the other dak", he told his steno.

Once again, he took up the letter he had received and glanced at the letter-head: "Sharda Mills (P) Ltd." Below was printed in small letters "incorporating Shanti Woollen Mills, Century Carpets & Druggets and the Textile Printers". The address was: "Prasad Nagar, Ghaziabad".

The Minister was a busy man, but he got up as if his work had been interrupted and told the peon who was near him, "I shall be back in a few minutes". The peon mumbled: "There are some visitors waiting. Shall I ask them to wait?"

"Yes, please, certainly. Tell my P.A. to send for some cool drinks and convey my apologies. If any one is in a great hurry, ask him to fix up alternative time for him."

The Hon. Rattanlalji then got out of the room, the peon holding the door open for him and walked into the private chambers of his house.

He called for his wife, a simply-dressed woman in her fifties, who like her husband had also kept up her good health and appearance.

"I came in to tell you, my dear, I have had a letter from my old friend Cuckoo. He has made a request to see me—I don't know what he wants—and I have asked him to come. I was sorry and happy and, somehow, I began to think of old times and came in for a few minutes for myself".

"What should he want from you after all that he has done, including sending you to jail," commented his wife.

"Please, please, Dhannoo", he intervened, "He did not send me to jail. I was drawn into it by the

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conspiracy of some mischievous elements who wanted to involve me in a law-breaking demonstration. If you break the law, you have to take the consequences. Further, I don't know whether you have thought about it. It was going to jail which made me a popular leader and here I am now, Minister".

"You do argue funny", his wife retorted. "I did not fight with him, it was you who created all that rumpus. We all cried to you not to go and fight him with all his money. You wouldn't listen. You don't know what we passed through. We can never forgive that man".

"They say," said the Minister "women have one eye at the back of their head. That is why they are unable to see the front or the back in the correct perspective. There was a time when you thought Cuckoo was our saviour and 'but for him' you used to say, 'what would have happened to us?' And now what? You can *never forgive* that man".

"You are the person arguing in circles, not me", Mrs. Rattanlal said. "Look, he gave you a good job and you fought with him—nearly wrecked the mill and caused a riot. Then he began to fight and sent you to jail. Now, he wants to come and see you. I do not understand all this. Better keep away and end this drama. That is what I would say".

"You would, and you are more right than you know", her husband said, "Yes, it has been a drama".

Mr. Rattanlal sat down on a sofa while his wife sat on the plush woollen carpet spread on the floor. Although the great house was littered with all kinds of luxurious chairs, Mrs. Rattanlal rarely sat in a chair—except, of course, when she had to play the role of hostess and V.I.P.s came.

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A peon came and gently tapped on the door and the wife asked, "Who is it?". He said that the Secretary wanted to know when he would come to the office. Rattanlal raised his voice and said: "Not before lunch. Tell him not to detain people unnecessarily".

"Listen, my dear," he continued addressing his wife, "It is true I have fought with Cuckoo, but you must remember, I have always loved him too".

"This may be your wise male talk, but it does sound odd to me. You say you fought him and you loved him and yet, you say, you are speaking most sensibly. I don't understand it".

"Yes and No, my dear, Yes and No. That is what it is. The point is, some of these fights are not personal. You fight because you can't help it. You are in it and you can't help fighting. Now, see, Cuckoo wants to come. You think he comes to express his gratitude? Not on my word. His visit is official or professional, or whatever you call it".

"But you want to make a hullabaloo about it. Why have you come in leaving your work and all? Obviously, you are so happy your friend Cuckoo is coming. Is it personal or official? This is why people say, when politicians say "Yes", they mean "No" and when they say "No", they mean "Yes". I don't think I can ever understand you".

"You are right about one thing". Mr. Rattanlal said, "I *am* a little excited about meeting Cuckoo. We have loved and fought. You know, Dhannoo, I suppose I am getting old. I feel very soft towards Cuckoo".

"Well, see him and make up your mind. I don't think you both think alike any way", she said.

"Why should we ? Why should he think like me ?

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But there are areas where we differ and where we agree".

"There you are, indulging in your conundrums again. What do you think I am ? Am I your public meeting for you to try to confuse me ?"

"My dear Dhannoo, you are the only person who thinks like this. Do you know, my partymen think I am the only man in the government who talks like 'Two and Two make Four'. The Prime Minister is very pleased with me".

"Is there any Minister who thinks otherwise ? Whatever all that may be, I would like you to keep away from your friend Cuckoo. 'My friend Cuckoo', 'My friend Cuckoo', 'My friend Cuckoo'—for Heaven's sake, please have a heart. I can't suffer the agony of your being sent to jail again".

"How difficult to make you understand ! Cuckoo did not send me to jail. It was the law: All law-breakers go to jail, and I broke the law".

"That is exactly what I say. If that Cuckoo comes again, you will break the law again".

The door opened and a young man came in. He was also dressed in his pyjama and shirt and, from the resemblance and the freedom with which he walked in, it was obvious that he was the Minister's son.

"What is the matter, Daddy ? At this time of the day, you should be busy in the office. I heard some conversation in mother's room and I came in to see, what's going on ?"

The telephone in the room rang and the lady answered it and handed the instrument to her husband.

"I am afraid I can't come to Parliament before lunch. I don't think there is anything that much important. Tell him that he can be present in the

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House and, if necessary, ask him to give me a ring after lunch and I shall come".

He hang up the receiver and told his wife—"It was Venkatramji who wanted to know whether I was coming to Parliament. These Deputy Ministers always want to know when we are not coming, so that they can make their own show in the House. Young people are and should be ambitious. That is what I say always".

"I am glad you came in, son, We were talking about old times as an old friend is coming to visit us".

"Visit us ? I thought you said he was coming to meet you", his wife interposed.

"Yes, yes, yes, Meet or visit is all the same. After all, he is an old friend. What is the harm in his visiting us ? Now that Sharda is here, you can remember that he is named after my friend Cuckoo—Sharda Prasad Sharma".

"Do you remember, son, our house in Ghaziabad ? We were there till you were seven or eight ?", Rattanlal asked his son.

"I remember something vaguely. There were many small houses and a factory or something. I remember this—one night, we all left in a great hurry. There were so many people and a lot of noise. Something terrible had happened—I don't remember what. Grandma was very very ill, I think. She was lifted by people. It is all vague. I don't remember clearly. I think something of it all may have been a dream and, may be, something did happen, because I know very well that we came to Delhi and I joined my school here".

"It is all real, very very real", exclaimed his mother. "How can I forget ? That was the day

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your father was taken to jail and some friends came in a great hurry to take us away".

"Yes, Sharda, it is a very old story. It is good to know, though you must not remember the unpleasant part of it. You know the old saying: You should live in the present and not in the past. The past is gone and dead, the present is real".

"Your mother always harps on my jail going", he continued, "but it was from that day, my life changed".

"You should know about it, son. After all, you are nearly twenty-six and your memory should not be full of gaps so far as our family story is concerned; and it is good for you to know that I did not start my life as a labour leader or politician. I was a very humble man, indeed, a very very poor man. We lived in Delhi before you were born and went to Ghaziabad because I was given a job there in a mill—a textile mill which you thought was a factory. It was a giant mill with some 3000 workers and many associated companies. I was a small clerk in the time-keeping department.

"The proprietor was a friend of my childhood days and he gave me the job. But after he had done this help, he kept me away. In fact, he was very harsh and cruel. I was very mortified and wanted to run away, but we were poor and you were about to be born. There was a free hospital there and you were born there. I suppose it was the imminence of this event which kept me on there. Anyway, your mother and grandmother, that is, my mother, who was living then, pressed me not to do anything foolish. And I stuck to my job, though I spent many miserable days there. You were born in the midst of that storm and partly in anger and partly in love and partly also in the

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hope that you would one day become a rich man like him, I named you after my friend, Sharda Prasad. You may remember my mentioning about my friend Cuckoo. That is the man.

"What has happened now is that Cuckoo has sent me a letter after many years wanting to see me. Somehow, this letter brought back to my memory the old days and that is why I came in to talk about it with your mother".

"What is special about this friend, Daddy ? It is nice to know how I got my name. Sometimes I used to wonder why I am not a 'Lal'. You used to mention about your father 'Krishan Lal', your cousin 'Chandulal'. How did I become a 'Prasad'. It seems you have given up something of your family to remember a friend!"

"Yes, son, you can put it that way. As I told you, it was not much of a deliberate choice, but I was emotionally worked up and thought of many things. I was telling you this old story".

"Some months after you were born, one day I attended a workers' rally in the town and all the mill hands went there. The mill was closed. It was a May Day, I think. May Day was not a holiday then. At any rate, our boss had not declared it a holiday, but we all went and the mill was closed. Some days later, I was asked to explain why I absented myself and attended this rally. I learnt that such a letter had not been sent to all people, but only to me in our office. I got wild, but, since I could not meet the Chief and spend my anger on him, I met our union leader. He was very sympathetic and hearing my story that I had been an old friend of my boss and finding also—I think that this was partly what attracted

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him—I could work myself up into a fury, he made me a member of our Union Committee. He asked me not to write anything in reply to the letter I had received, saying, 'Let us see what happens'.

"Nothing happened in fact and life went on as usual except that I was given a lot of work in the Committee. Originally, it was all filing and keeping the papers in order since I was not much educated. But I was asked to join the night school run jointly in a cooperative way by the company and the trade union—the former providing the building and we the teaching staff. There was some kind of a 'learn quick' method there and, in a few days, I could understand difficult English books and my own Hindi had always been good.

"Since I had no work at all in my department, I had plenty of time and I immersed myself in reading and in trade Union work. With our leader, I attended some Union meetings outside our district. I don't know if all this was known to Cuckoo who was Managing Director of the Mill and our top boss. But he did not interfere anyway. I must say that he left me alone. You know he could have chucked me out even for my first offence—I had ignored the 'show cause' notice his office had sent about my May Day absence. I don't know to this day whether he knew I was getting more and more involved in the Union work. Besides the Mill, he had a number of other companies and we got all these workers to join our Union. By the time you were three or four, we had a big Union with some 5000 members—the biggest Union in the district I think and I was now a well established Union man, kept at the forefront because of my special claim on my Union boss.

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"The ironic part of the story is that I have now become his bitterest enemy. It happened this way As I learnt more and more of this union work, I began to see how politicians were coming to us, friendly like, offering to help us with the Government and so on. There were even some meetings with this politician and that. It all came to a head when an election came.

"My blood pressure goes up when I think of those days. There was so much tension. There were three or four political parties, I remember, and they all wanted us to join them and vote for their candidate. I was watching all this with amusement until someone told me that our Union Chief had taken some money and wanted our Union to link up with a political group. One thing I was a stickler about from my earliest days—that was honesty. It was perhaps the manner in which my father deserted us and my mother used to tell me that he was a "dishonest" man. Every time I heard about someone being dishonest, my mind revolted.

"I was not any more a hot-headed boy and so I decided to get some more information before I acted. This came to me rather luckily, without my having to take much effort. One day, the leader of the same political group who was a big noise in the town sent for me through a friend and I went and saw him. He was very patronising at first but gradually came down to wooing me saying that he had learnt I was a coming up Union leader and that there was a great future for me. He then asked me to join his party. I was greatly tickled, but did not know what to say when he made his big blunder.

"We shall make it worthwhile for you", he said, "our party has sanctioned Rs. 1000 to every labour

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leader who joins our party and I shall put you in that category".

"That struck me as nothing but an offer of a bribe. And, especially since I had heard that some money had been given to our leader, I was alerted. So, I gently told him that I would have to ask my Union leader, for the decision would ultimately rest with him.

"O, he comes in a higher category and we have given him Rs. 5000. He is already a sworn member and we are arranging to make him a member of our National Executive".

"I did not know what he was talking about but that made up my mind. I told him that I would have a talk with my leader and decide.

"He was not happy but there was nothing he could do about it as I was firm.

"At our next weekend Union meeting, I brought up this matter and the war started between me and my leader. He got very wild and arraigned me personally saying that I was an ungrateful pup and he would see that I learnt how to behave. I was touched to the quick and came out with the story of the bribe. He tried to shout me down but this was not easy with a man like me and a verbal free-for-all started. At the end of it, I was amazed to find that my eloquence about our sense of loyalty to our cause as working people, and not to the cause of politicians, won me support and it was decided to call a larger meeting of our Union activists to reach a decision.

"It was at this meeting, I found my power of speech. I found I could move people by my talk—simple home-truths jammed with emotion and a will not to submit to low tactics. My friend, my leader, was

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flabbergasted at my sudden elevation to leadership. The proposal for the Union to join any political party was rejected out of hand. No mention was made about the money our leader had taken which had now become more or less a 'public secret'.

"At the next meeting I was unanimously elected President of our Union. There was a lot of celebration. My chair, with me on it, was lifted and I was taken in a procession and was drowned by flower garlands.

"That is how I became a leader, my son—not because I chose to become one or had the talents for it and I was there at the top before I knew it. Our rejected leader left our company service and I am told he is deeply involved with his political associates and has become a full-fledged mischief-maker. I have not, however, met him since.

"It was in my new capacity, I met Cuckoo for the first time officially at the mill. We have, once a year, a Workers and Management get-together, which actually Cuckoo had first organised to create a bond of common interest between the workers and the management. This usually began with a meeting at which both the Union leader and the Managing Director addressed the workers. We were both on a raised dais and I garlanded Cuckoo and he garlanded me. We shook hands, but, except a smile, we exchanged no greeting. Our previous meeting had been a very unpleasant one for both of us. That was at the big outer gate of the mill when I hailed him as 'Cuckoo' and he frowned at me and went away without responding. Subsequently, he summoned me to his office and warned me that he would discharge me if I showed any familiarity towards him.

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"Well, those days were gone and here we were, both on the same dais garlanding each other".

Mr. Rattanlal paused as his wife and son sat in enraptured silence.

"I did not know all this", mumbled his wife.

"How could you ?" he retorted, "You were always blaming me for my union activities and warning me I would lose my job and we would be in the streets. You were even reluctant to give some tea to my co-workers when they called on us and, but for my mother, who had a better sense, you would have insulted them.

"Anyway, now I am hungry. Let us have lunch", he said.

His wife went out and came back and said that they could go for lunch. As he came back to his wife's room, Rattanlal sent for his Secretary and told him that he was not feeling well and would not be going out.

"If there is anything very urgent, call me. Otherwise, let me rest. I don't think anything 'important' is pending" he said.

He had become so full of his past, suddenly recalled to memory by his old friend's letter, that he sat down again absorbed in the story.

"You see, that was how it was. After being a menial in that mill, in five years, I had, guided by a strange destiny, come to a position where I sat as an equal with the Chief of our gigantic organisation. You will be interested to know that what followed must have shaken Cuckoo more. After Cuckoo had made a formal speech of welcome and greeting and assurances of goodwill and so on, when I got up, there was such a thundrous cheering that I was myself surprised about what these people had discovered in a man who had

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begun life as a cycle repair shop assistant. Then I spoke, greatly moved emotionally about the institution where they worked. I told them that it was they, the workers, who gave it life and purpose. What could those massive structures of cement and stone and those giant wheels and spindles mean if there were no men to keep them alive ? They in fact were the body and soul of the industry. If they were not there, there was no mill and no industry. The place would look like a graveyard. They were its power and its will. Then, I called upon the management to deal with them, not as hired men and women, but as partners in a great enterprise which served all of us and all the nation.

"Cheering after cheering, applause after applause, accompanied me as I got along. I was not myself when finally I sat down and our workers gave me a long standing ovation.

"That was how it was, my son. There is no greater joy than to be loved and to be loved by so many and in that wonderful way, would make a man feel, not proud, but humble, because when so many people show such confidence in you, you begin to wonder whether you are worthy of it and you become humble.

"Cuckoo himself was greatly impressed by my speech and joined the audience in its final applause and when I sat down, he leaned and patted me on the back. But, in his eye, I found that he was now regarding me more as a dangerous adversary than a friend.

"Cuckoo, I must say, was a rare employer and we lacked nothing by way of amenities. There were all kinds of Workers Committees which periodically put up requests and, invariably, they were sanctioned. The mill was making big profits and everything was fine.

"In the sixth year of my life in the mill, a move

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was made for a district federation of workers of various industries and I was elected President of this body which had some 50,000 members. It was a tremendously prestigious position and I was asked to move to a bungalow, in a more central part of the town, but I declined saying that I was basically a worker and I didn't want to leave my job. I stayed on, therefore, in our two-room tenement, but I spent most of my time in our big Union's office as I had no space in my house to meet people. I would go to my time-keeping office once in a while but this ceased to be important as years passed by. I continued to draw my salary. I never saw Cuckoo except at our annual meetings.

"Trouble started in my seventh year of service in Sharda Mills. In the district Union, we had been having trouble with local political parties and I had avoided linking up with any of them. I was generally able to keep my workers together, but agitation was intense and serious workers' troubles started in various other companies, largely due to the political activities of different parties. There were strikes and lay-offs and I had to spend days and nights in negotiations and was quite sick of it all.

"Finally, the demand was made that we should be given our proper share in the management. This was a national claim, which developed with the awakening of workers everywhere and the ruling Congress party leaders included this demand in their labour platform. I was under pressure from various sides and the justification was the manner in which some Union men in the district conducted their operations. I was convinced that there was a justification for it because some big industrialists who had tie-ups in different States were neck-deep in frauds. In one case, I found that

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inferior quality artificial yarn was manufactured, declared as waste and sent to some centres where it was processed into "woollen goods" and marketed. I gathered that the firm concerned made millions of rupees that way and, being a technical operation, the workers did not become wise to it.

"The suggestion was mooted that the campaign should be begun at our Centre as, with an enlightened management, we could hope for quick success here and thus I should start a system of worker-management schemes in the whole district. I was convinced that this was premature, if not unnecessary in our centre, as the happiest relations prevailed between workers and the management here. I was reluctant to meet Cuckoo alone after our first and only private meeting in our office when he ordered me to keep away from him (this gloomy memory haunted me for years), but I did eventually agree to a formal meeting with a delegation.

"Cuckoo summarily rejected the proposal by saying that the motivations were sinister. 'Why do you make this demand when there has not been a single industrial dispute in our organisation for the last one decade ? I object to it because you find it easier to attack a friend than an enemy. My father started life as a poor man. We are not afraid to be poor again. I shall destroy this mill rather than encourage you in your attempt to intimidate me for no other reason than that I have been a good employer.'

"I knew in my mind that Cuckoo was quite right, but he was very harsh and, in negotiations, it was unwise to be harsh. We were curtly dismissed, not even detained to have our tea which had been ordered. I

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was very much upset with the entire situation—angry, not only with Cuckoo but myself and everyone else.

"While I myself had not assessed the situation that way, word spread that I had been insulted and thrown out of the office. I was in a quandary, for defending the management in any way would mean that I was myself against the proposal I had gone to plead for. I kept quiet but something like a conflagration began. My attempts to restrain my men were futile. Local political groups had come in in a big way.

"Finally, there were violent incidents, but most of the people who were involved were not our union men but outsiders, mostly some terrorist elements. I did not know till later that they were determined to get me involved in some kind of violence. What happened was that when I went to the van of the demonstrators to plead for restraint, rioting broke out and a number of people were serously injured. Cuckoo called for police help and many of us were arrested, charged with rioting, arson and attempt to murder.

"Some of my workers, who knew my mind and my way of work ferretted out evidence and engaged lawyers for my defence and I was excluded from the graver charges but, on a charge of abetment, sentenced to three months imprisonment. When I was left off with that a light sentence, my friends felt that the violent elements which had failed in their campaign to involve me in terrorist activity, feared that you would all be attacked and they had you all removed to an undisclosed place of safety.

"From the days of the freedom struggle, you know, how imprisonment had become some kind of martyrdom. I realized this when I came out of jail. My popularity had increased manifold and I was elected

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Vice-chairman of the All-India Textile Workers Federation. As I had to leave my job in the Sharda Mills in all this turbulence, I was given an honorarium and was persuaded to take up a Congress ticket for Parliament. I was living in a dizzy world and I made countless number of speeches and, ultimately, was elected to Parliament from my own Ghaziabad constituency with a thumping majority. I was elected again for a second term and then I was also made a Minister.

"That is my story, my son, which there has been no occasion for me to tell. What is of interest is the strange way destiny works. I do not claim any special virtues and I don't blame men like Cuckoo, who have been doing on the whole a good job for the country. That is why, when I got Cuckoo's letter, I was greatly moved and I longed to meet him again. We have not met for some 20 years, I think.

"Let us have him for dinner, if we can", he told his wife and she agreed.

When finally, Cuckoo came to the Minister, the first thing Mr. Rattan Lal asked him was whether they could talk to each other as Cuckoo and Rattan.

"It is now your turn to call the tune, Rattan, and it is gracious of you to say that, when you are in a position to do what you like and I am the petitioner. I hope I am honest when I say that you have taught me a lesson in good behaviour, or rather, God has taught me through you. Though you have been poor, and never wealthy, you have always been on a higher moral plane and I admit my inferiority."

The trouble confronting Cuckoo, Rattan Lal learnt with amazement, was domestic. He had some relatives as partners and his three sons were involved with different groups and, his control having weakened through

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these partnerships, the mills and factories—he had ten of them now—were going to dogs. Actually, he came to persuade Mr. Rattanlal to intervene with the government department concerned to take them over under the "mismanagement" clause and save the industry.

The Minister was stupified that such an excellent manager as Cuckoo should be defeated by such a ridiculous domestic situation. Any way, there it was and they found that they had no ready solution for it. But that night, Cuckoo joined them for dinner and Rattanlal had not known such domestic felicity for many years.

It was easy for him to have the industries controlled by Cuckoo taken over, for this was a policy government followed in the case of 'mismanaged industries'. But Rattanlal felt that the Sharda Mills and associated companies were really very well managed companies and he was against use of government authority which in such a case would really be an abuse. But he heard with surprise that Cuckoo had already confidentially conveyed his request to the government and the machinery had begun to move.

It was a tricky job for Mr. Rattanlal to solve this muddle. He could not in all conscience allow this to go through but, at the same time, it would be inconsistent with government policy to refuse to take over an industry whose management itself admitted "mismanagement".

Cuckoo was persuaded to come and stay with Mr. Rattanlal and the association became a family reunion. For a week, the debate and discussion continued till one day Cuckoo suggested that Rattanlal himself should undertake the management. After all, he had once demanded a share in the management and

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the offer was coming to him with compound interest. He could have the whole and sole right of management as Union leader.

Rattan asked Cuckoo to "shut-up" and not to make a serious problem ridiculous.

"There is only one other solution", Cuckoo said, "though I am diffident to make it".

"Please don't hesitate to make it. When a big and successful man becomes *diffident,* it is like the tiger preparing for a big pounce. Come on, go ahead, Cuckoo. Tell me what you have in mind.

"I have a daughter, Bulu we call her. She is a sweet girl and has just finished college. If your son can marry her, I shall make him an equal partner and hand over the management to him. Under your umbrella, the trouble-makers will pipe down" he said.

Rattanlal gave one of his big laughs. "You are giving too big a job for a cycle workshop hand's son", he exclaimed.

"Yes I know. That is the penalty I have to give for not making you a partner 25 years ago".

Mr. Rattan Lal threw all party policies to the winds and manoeuvred to get Cuckoo's request for a take-over rejected. And Sharda Prasad Jr. married Sharda Prasad Sr.'s daughter, Bulu.

Two days later, the country learned with shock that the Labour Minister had submitted his resignation on personal grounds. Mr. Rattanlal had met the Prime Minister earlier and reported that he had, for the sake of an old friend, violated one of the policy programmes of the Party and, therefore, wished to resign because this might lead to embarrassment for the party.

Poor Mrs. Rattanlal was miserable and told her husband that the moment Cuckoo came into their life

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again, she knew something horrible was going to happen. She was in tears that evening when she saw the staff leaving. "We don't have even a house to which we can move", she sobbed.

It was then that Rattanlal took out a letter from his pocket and gave it to his son to be read out to his mother. It was a letter from the Prime Minister appointing him Governor of one of the southern States.

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A BENGALI COUP

Memorandum

Ag. Superintendent, Mr. A. N. Banerjee, has been noticed to be arriving at the office systematically half an hour late every morning. This is a serious breach of discipline and he has been advised accordingly several times. Warning is hereby given that, if the officer concerned, does not improve, stern disciplinary action will be taken. He must report to the undersigned on arrival every morning to note his arrival time in the Register.

.....1931 *Sd/-*

New Delhi Asstt. Secretary (A)

(Foreign & Political Department,

Government of India)

Mr. Banerjee saw this note on his table kept in place at the centre by the weight of his pin-cushion so that he could not miss it. A portly man of fifty, short with a round face, looking intellectual with his thick-framed spectacles, he took it up and read it slowly, put it down and took it up and read it over and over again. Then he sat back in his chair thinking.

He called one of his junior colleagues by name, another Bengali gentleman, and gave him the note.

"I have read it" the latter said, "In fact, we have all read it. At the stroke of 10, Miller Saheb came into the room and, as we were wondering why he was there, he walked up to your table and kept it there and walked away. We were naturally curious and all of us had a look into it. He had evidently intended that we should. So, you don't mind ?"

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"O, no, not at all. I am thinking what I should do", Mr. Banerjee said.

"You can meet him, apologise and say a few nice things and he will forget all about it", commented the Assistant.

"I do not think so. He is an Anglo-Indian and they are always under a complex that they are not as much respected as Britishers are, even though they are also white men. The more you yield to them, the more they ride the high horse. No. Though I know he is a simple man, I shall have to teach him a lesson".

The Assistant broke into Bengali and warned him that he would get into trouble if he became "adventurous".

Mr. Banerjee remained silent. "Let us see," he said and they turned to the day's work.

The next morning, Mr. Banerjee reached his office half an hour late as usual and walked up to the Assistant Secretary's room. He saluted the officer in military fashion which was the mode of greeting in those days to white officers. Mr. Miller noted the time in the Attendance Register and signalled to Mr. Banerjee to sign, which he did. No words were exchanged.

The routine went on day after day. Mr. Banerjee's Section consisted of some eight Assistants and a number of clerks. He was an efficient officer and an expert in Secretariat practice. He was a man of the old grand Bengali style, not sophisticated that is to say, as was manifested by his dress which was the typical Bengali dhoti and the closed coat which was neither a short coat nor the long sherwani which went down to the knees. He was slightly bald and grey but was otherwise a picture of health. He was not garrulous by any means but loved a good joke now and then, but

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the *correct* ones which did not suggest even remotely obscenity.

He worked hard and regularly and somehow managed to maintain discipline. Caution was necessary, especially now, in dealing with the staff because he knew that, once any issue of discipline went up to the Assistant Secretary who was in charge of Administration, the verdict would go against him. He solved the problem by working hard and sharing the load of many of his junior colleagues. This meant staying on in the office after the regular hours. He did not mind this since he felt that, logically, he was obliged to do so as he came late in the morning.

At the end of the month, Mr. Miller sent for him and told him sharply that the Register showed that he had come half an hour late every day of the month. He said he could not tolerate this any more as it was a clear instance of defiance of orders.

Mr. Banerjee asked permission to explain the reason and went into his daily routine. He belonged to an orthodox Brahmin family and being the eldest son, had to attend to the family Pooja* in the morning. He got up at 4 a.m. and, without wasting a minute, devoted himself to the rigid ritual which took him to very near 10 o'clock. And then, after a hasty meal, he rushed to the office. With these obligations at home, he could not come to his office even a minute earlier. Conscientiously, he stayed on in the office an hour or more late after office hours if necessary, to complete the work and there had been no complaint of arrears from his section.

The Assistant Secretary was not satisfied and dec-

* Ritual worship.

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lared that "domestic problems" could not be allowed to undermine discipline in the office.

That evening he demanded a written explanation from Mr. Banerjee, which the latter gave, narrating, as he had done in person, his daily routine at home. Mr. Miller was angry at the brazenness of an officer who was prepared to put down on paper such "silly reasons" to explain such indiscipline and decided to take punitive action against Mr. Banerjee. Being in charge of Administration, he knew all the tricks of the trade and when a super-numerary officer was found to be without a post, he posted him to this section and Mr. Banerjee reverted to his substantive junior post of Assistant. This did not affect Mr. Banerjee monetarily because he had reached the maximum of the lower grade and the beginning of the new grade was not far higher. But the reversion had clearly meant demotion and his junior colleagues felt that injustice had been done to him.

Mr. Miller was happy for a time thinking that this should teach the "bloke" better manners. But it didn't. Mr. Banerjee's routine remained unchanged. He came late and whenever official matters brought them together, all the tension was on the side of Mr. Miller. Mr. Banerjee remained unaffected.

At last, Mr. Miller found that he was losing face with the subordinate staff on account of Mr. Banerjee's "defiance". He took up the matter with his superior officer, the Deputy Secretary, a British I.C.S. Officer, who irritated Mr. Miller by bursting into a laugh. Higher up in the old Foreign and Political Department, which had a curious set-up in that their main work was dealing with the Princely Order, Officers had plenty of occasions for fun. The Princes were a joke and,

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without much work, the mood in the F.&P. Department varied between dull routine and ridiculously pompous protocol over empty-headed Princes who were dragons at home and mice when they came before the Viceroy or Crown Representative as he was called.

Mr. Banerjee had come up for notice among this fun-loving crowd by his penchant for expressive English idioms. He had joined the Government when the Viceroy's office in Calcutta had moved over to New Delhi with the historic event of the transfer of the capital from Calcutta to New Delhi. In his own small way, he had brought with him all the Calcutta traditions, including the traditional dhoti and *kurta*.* He had a large family and, inside the house, the atmosphere was the same as that of Kalighat.

But what had attracted the senior officials were Mr. Banerjee's picturesque notings in his inimmitable English style, where the sense was always clear but grammar and idiom were thrown to the winds; nor did Mr. Banerjee go in for simple, short words and brief sentences. Every sentence was full of high sounding words. The senior officers simply loved him for his laughable faults.

So, Mr. Miller's boss was reluctant to sanction any penal action against Mr. Banerjee and, at the same time, he could not go against any official notice of indiscipline. So, he left it to Mr. Miller to take such action as he deemed fit.

This came in the form of a bolt from the blue for Mr. Banerjee on the first of the next month when he learnt to his dismay that his salary for the month had been withheld on the orders of the Assistant Secretary.

Among his formidable qualities as a true Hindu,

** Long flowing shirt without collar.

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stoicism was one and Mr. Banerjee showed no reaction and no protest and carried on day after day, reaching the office half an hour late as usual and leaving an hour or so late.

One month, two months, three months passed and Mr. Miller watched with uncontrollable irritation combined with admiration the manner in which Mr. Banerjee was carrying on and, even when they had to meet each other officially, he maintained a normal and even decorously courteous demeanour without a single gesture of protest or resentment.

Mr. Banerjee also did not make any complaint at home. There was a Bengalee Association which ran some kind of a Thrift Fund and Mr. Banerjee took a loan from it for house expenses so that nothing appeared abnormal either at home or in the office even though, month after month, Mr. Banerjee did not draw any salary.

Mr. Banerjee's story was on everybody's lips except his own. He never mentioned it to anyone and did not allow anyone to talk about it.

Ultimately one day, Mr. Banerjee was found to be sitting at home on a Sunday in his room with doors closed and allowing no one to interrupt him. Sunday was usually a day for spring-cleaning at home over which he presided noisily, followed by marketing and an evening worship at the Kali temple. But this Sunday, he locked himself up in his room giving cause for speculation. When it seemed to take an anxious turn, Mr. Banerjee opened the door and assured the family that everything was all right with him and he was writing something in connection with the office and he did not want to be disturbed.

He finished well before the evening and went to

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the temple as usual, carrying a long envelope with him which ostensibly contained his Mss. He gave it to the priest to be placed at the feet of Kali-Ma and got it back with the *prasad*.

This unusual activity was not understood by his household until much later though they knew the father was as astute as he was bold and punctilious and religious. Mr. Banerjee was a stern man at home and would not allow his wife and children to discuss office matters and, therefore, the mystery was in a state of stalemate until everything became clear in the end.

The Foreign and Political Department had a special position in the old Imperial Secretariat, being different from other departments in that it was directly under the Viceroy or Crown Representative, while each of the other depertments was under the respective Hon'ble Member of the Executive Council. One consequence of this distinction was that the Viceroy would visit all the sections of the Foreign & Political Department once a year and talk to the staff—a unique honour for the latter. Sometimes, he would spend a whole day in the various sections talking to the staff.

Seven months had passed after Mr. Miller passed orders withholding Mr. Banerjee's salary when the annual great event of the Viceroy's visit came. Mr. Banerjee dressed up very carefully for the event with a cap to cover his head, his coat shining after repeated pressing by the local dhobi, though his face was unshaven. Mr. Banerjee had a shave only on certain auspicious days.

The Viceroy's visit was a grand ceremony. Lord I— was an extremely tall man, thin and austre whenever he spoke to the members of his staff, senior or junior. He would be accompanied by a small army of officials

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beginning with the Secretary to the Governor-General-in Council and various Secretaries and Joint Secretaries and his A.D.C.'s and security men.

On the appointed day, when the Viceroy came into the office where Mr. Banerjee was working, Mr. Banerjee stood up and bowed most pompously and ceremoniously to gain attention. This drew the Viceroy near him and, sure that His Excellency would not miss a word, Mr. Banerjee suddenly drew out of his pocket a thick foolscap size paper and began reading with a stentorian voice:

"May it please your Excellency.....

The train of officers present were taken by surprise by the unusual event and would have stopped him but for the fact that the Viceroy stood with an amused smile and encouraged Mr. Banerjee to read his document.

"May it please your Excellency," Mr. Banerjee resumed. "I am among those many millions who have watched through the years your miraculous career and I have prayed to God every morning to give your Excellency a more grand career. After being Viceroy of India, I pray to God. you will become the Governor-General of Canada and then, Australia and the Secretary of the State for India and the Dominions and Foreign Secretary in London and Prime Minister of Great Britain and finally become the Assistant Secretary of the Foreign & Political Department in New Delhi."

"What is that ? Would you read that again, please" the Viceroy said.

Mr. Banerjee read the whole address again clearly and loudly and handed it to the Viceroy without batting

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an eyelid and gave another of his magnificient stately bows.

The Viceroy patted him, all his good humour roused to incredible surprise and amusement, and spoke to Mr. Banerjee.

'You want me to become the Governor-General of Canada and Prime Minister of Great Britain and then become Assistant Secretary of the Foreign & Political Department ? or, am I mistaken ?"

"No, your Lordship, that is what I precisely mean and may God, in his infinite mercy, grant it."

"Doesn't it look a little funny, my friend", the Viceroy asked. "From Prime Ministership to Assistant Secretaryship."

"No, your Lordship, it is very simple. As Viceroy or Governor-General or Prime Minister, can you withhold a clerk's salary ? As Assistant Secretary, you can. That is real power. No one except an Assistant Secretary can stop a clerk's salary. May God grant you as a crowning blessing that unique power!", Mr. Banerjee said.

"Why do you say so ?" persisted the Viceroy.

"Well sir, although I have nearly 30 years of service, the Assistant Secretary in this office has stopped my salary and I have not been paid for seven months".

"Why did he do this ? He must have a reason".

"You can judge on that, your Lordship", Mr. Banerjee said. "I am a religious-minded Hindu, Sir, and every day I get up at four o'clock in the morning. I do not waste a minute and finish my pooja at ten o'clock. I have hardly time for a full meal and I rush to the office. It is true I reach office half an hour late. I have to walk two miles. Is it possible to come

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faster, Sir, walking two miles ? I sit one hour or more late every day to finish my work. What more can I do your Lordship ? The Assistant Secretary is angry and he has the power to withhold my salary and he has done it. I felt, Your Excellency, you have no such power and so I thought it would be a fitting climax to your magnificient career and prayed for the same".

The Viceroy was greatly amused and struck at the adroit manner in which the astute Bengali had chosen to invite his attention to his personal problem.

"This is my order, my dear Banerjee", the Viceroy said to the hearing of all present, "that you shall not come to the office without doing your Pooja to your satisfaction whether you are half an hour or one hour late. And you shall leave the office in time".

The Viceroy then pulled up a chair and sat down. He called his Secretary to send for the Assistant Secretary. Mr. Miller appeared in seconds in great trepidation while Mr. Banerjee stood on one side with face bowed humbly.

"You must be a funny man to be without humour", the Viceroy told Mr. Miller, "You rush back and bring this poor man's salary here with all arrears to the last penny and pay him here and now. If you don't, I will be in danger, for all Banerjee's hard prayer, of becoming the Assistant Secretary of the Foreign & Political Department".

When Mr. Miller walked away, Lord I—— asked Mr. Banerjee to come near and sit. He made inquiries about his family and his Pooja. Lord I—— is seemed, had never before enjoyed such a delectable conversation.

Within minutes, Mr. Banerjee's accumulated moneys were paid and the Viceroy got up and shook hands with him and exclaimed as he walked on: "Christ,

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how dreadfully near I was to becoming the Assistant Secretary of the Foreign & Political Department". The entourage laughed.

In the next Emperor's Birthday Honours list, Mr. Banerjee became a "Rai Saheb", a glorific of those days for distinguished public servants in the lower order of the Imperial Secretariat heirarchy. Mr. John Walter Miller had himself made the recommendation and the Viceroy affixed his signature to the list with great pleasure.

Bhawan's Sri Sankaracharya Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya
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ABHILASHA & Other Stories

By P. R. TAIKAD

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